

REVAMPED: THEDA BARA, CULTURAL MEMORY,  
AND THE REPURPOSING OF STAR IMAGE

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Departments of Communication and Culture and American Studies  
Indiana University  
March 2015

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date of Dissertation Defense:  
February 15, 2013



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Between 1915 and 1925, Theda Bara, the actress typecast in both cinema and memory as “The Vamp,” starred in forty feature films; at present, three are known to survive. Despite this, her star image continues to circulate in popular culture and attract new fans. In examining the reasons for this unusual occurrence, this dissertation presents a cultural history and reception study of Bara’s image as it has been adapted, or repurposed, to convey disparate meanings in diverse contexts across a century. Combining archival research and ethnographic interviews, I use Bara as a case study in analyzing the role popular culture plays in people’s lives, and how audiences’ responses to the media become part of cultural memory. Working with film history, reception, memory, and gender studies methodologies, I argue that repurposings of Bara’s image, by the media and by media consumers alike, comprise a historical record, incorporating voices and perspectives often overlooked or unrecorded elsewhere, and revealing a century-long archive of changing values and attitudes about gender, sexuality, ethnic difference, cultural marginalization, and social transgression. By examining how these examples of media consumption function as remembrances, I further make the case that audiences have long served as amateur archivists, curators, and historians of cultural heritage through their interaction with the media and the resultant expressions of taste, knowledge, and affective attachments.

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### Curriculum Vita

## Introduction

### Theda Bara, History, and Memory

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*“But humankind, which is ever discovering new meaning, cannot always invent new forms; it must at times be content to invest old forms with new meanings.”*

— Gérard Genette<sup>1</sup>

In only twelve decades since the first public screening of motion pictures, a staggering amount of the world’s cinematic heritage has been lost. Through a host of technical, chemical, industrial, economic, and cultural factors, films of the silent era (roughly the 1890s to late 1920s) have been especially hard hit. According to many film historians, archivists, and preservationists (Horak, 2007; Houston, 1994; Slide, 1992; F. Thompson, 1996; Woodruff, 1999), between seventy-five and ninety percent of feature films from the silent era are gone forever, lost due to the flammability and volatility of nitrocellulose film stock, intentional destruction, carelessness, indifference, or other reasons.

Whatever the cause, each loss of a particular film represents a cultural lacuna that deprives us of a work of creative expression. If each cinematic image is, in film curator Paolo Cherchi Usai’s words, “the mirror of a society and a culture” (*Silent Cinema* 166), then film loss also imposes a forgotten-ness on many things we *could have* known about a certain time and place, as uniquely conveyed through the cinema. Loss of cinematic heritage also means the erasure from cultural memory of many formerly popular stars, forgotten amidst the flux of shifting tastes, cultural relevance, and cinematic canons.

This erasure has historical consequences because, in many ways, popular cultural products allow us to tap into matters of concern for people of the past that we might not

otherwise be able to access. A star's image, film roles, publicity, and attendant audience reception can tell us much about the range of convictions, desires, and hopes in a specific cultural-historical context. Just as the study of history helps us to arrive at a better understanding of our present condition, the study of popular cultural images of the past tells us much about how our current cultural state came to be. Many stars have taken on a function beyond entertainment or the embodiment of an ideal self, becoming representatives of particular historical eras, symbolic of the ethos, mores, and attitudes of their time. The study of stars and of historical audiences' responses to stars can be an effective means of formulating a more complex conception of the past and the people who preceded us.

This dissertation conducts an extended analysis of the intersection of media, audiences, and memory by exploring the many recurrences and rearticulations of the star image of Theda Bara, from 1915 to the present. I do so to argue that audience consumption and use of star images function as modes of remembrance, and have a meaningful and lasting impact on the shared beliefs that shape social realities, cultural memory, and inclusion in historical representation. Bara (whose real name is Theodosia Goodman, 1885–1955) was a major star of the 1910s, and along with Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, and Douglas Fairbanks, is one of the very few celebrities of the pre-World War I era to retain a presence in cultural memory. Unlike those stars, however, each of whom has an extant body of representative films, almost all of Bara's films are lost. Put under contract to the emergent Fox Film Corporation in 1914, Bara starred in thirty-nine feature films produced by the studio between 1914 and 1919; of those, only two are currently known to survive,<sup>2</sup> along with a feature and a short from her unsuccessful 1920s comeback.<sup>3</sup> Gone are her most lavish star vehicles, including the film with

which she is still most closely associated: the 1917 version of *Cleopatra* (Edwards) (Figure I.1), a longstanding inclusion on the American Film Institute's list of "most wanted" lost films.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure I.1:** This iconic image of Bara as Cleopatra, one of the most frequently reproduced photographs of the star, has contributed significantly to the ways she has been remembered for generations.

In spite of the almost total disappearance of her cinematic oeuvre, however, Bara occupies a fairly singular position in which the loss of her films has not meant the loss of the star.<sup>5</sup> She exemplifies Charles Maland's contention that a star's *image* "very often outlives a star," preserved by "the efforts of admirers, detractors, or commodifiers" (361). Indeed, precisely because her fame and her remembrance have largely been disconnected from cinematic narratives and filmgoing experiences for generations, Bara exists in cultural memory and discourse, perhaps more than any other performer in film history, as a *star* rather than an *actress*. With her long black hair, pale complexion, large, heavily lidded eyes copiously lined in black,

and an ample figure sometimes shown off by risqué costuming, Bara was an early (though not the first)<sup>6</sup> incarnation of an indelible cinematic archetype: the vamp—a predatory, heartless seductress, slinky, mysterious, and exotic—who wrecks homes and drives besotted men to ruin simply for the perverted pleasure of doing so.<sup>7</sup>

Although she is sometimes identified as the cinema's first sex symbol, Bara generally takes her place in film history as the primordial exemplar of a star whose fame had more to do with aggressive marketing campaigns and industry manipulation of moviegoers than with her work and merit. In contrast to earlier performers, who were appreciated by audiences because of their film appearances, Bara went from obscurity to

household name status with unprecedented rapidity, thanks to a media saturation publicity campaign: a seemingly instantaneous Theda-mania exploded before most audiences were able to see her first film, *A Fool There Was*, when it was released in January 1915. It mattered little that Bara, under the name Theodosia DeCoppet (her mother's maiden name, and subject to multiple permutations of spelling) had already been a struggling stage actress for nearly a decade (Figure I.2): her not particularly distinguished theater career left an open field for Fox to launch an assiduous publicity campaign—one that still retains an infamous reputation as pandering, deceptive, and gratuitously excessive.

As I demonstrate in my study, however, Bara's image and its cultural implications are more complex and multivalent than typically have been accounted for in film history,



**Figure I.2:** Theodosia De Cappet (sic), as Olga in the 1908 Chicago production of Ferenc Molnár's play *The Devil*. *Munsey's Magazine*, December 1908, page 407.

necessitating recognition that the historical reception of Bara's stardom is also complex, and often tellingly contradictory. Thus, while my work is in part a needed reconsideration of an important star who has received little scholarly attention, my primary focus is a larger cultural inquiry in which Bara's vamp image, its various permutations, and its cross-contextual endurance for nearly a century become case studies in probing questions of how and why stars *matter*, both at the historical-cultural and the personal-individual levels.

Locating answers to these questions requires a wide-ranging inquiry, and therefore my project includes multiple but interrelated theses. One important consideration is the interplay between "lostness" and survival in Bara's remembrance. Almost entirely separated from cinematic narratives and experiences, Bara is received as fragments and pastiche; the endlessly recombinant intertextuality through which she is "knowable" theoretically produces an abundance of interpretive opportunities and applications. Judith Mayne describes the "sheer wealth and diversity of material" that comprise a star's image as presenting a challenge to analysis or "easy categorization" (128), but these same conditions are also crucial to the remembrance of a star like Bara by enabling a greater degree of audience reinterpretation and appropriation of a star image in varying contexts. By extension, I further contend that the retention of Bara's star image in cultural memory is an example of how a seemingly outdated or even oppressive trope such as the vamp has nonetheless been rethought in ways that adapt her star image for personal (or less frequently ideological) use by a variety of fans, in spite of—or, as I will argue, possibly *because of*—the loss of most of her films.

The open-endedness of her image, the ambiguities, contradictions, and resistance to closure that support a variety of interpretations and meanings, is perhaps the key attribute that has kept that image circulating in cultural discourse for so long. Although Miriam Hansen has



deemed the concept of the “floating signifier” a cliché (267), this term is nonetheless a useful way for understanding how Bara’s image constitutes both a lack and plenitude of meaning. Although even her name may be forgotten, the recirculation of visual images (Figures I.3–I.8.), tropes, stories, styles, gossip, attitudes, and even dialogue (“Kiss me, my fool!”) in a vast intertextual web of references, imitations, variations, and parodies, demonstrates that the afterlife of a star image, even independent of filmic texts, can be plentiful and evocative in its polysemy and potential use value.



**Figures I.3, I.4:** Bara’s star image was reinforced and perpetuated by such visual tropes as costuming, poses, hairstyles, make-up, props, and confrontational gaze directed at the camera. Publicity photos of her costumed as Cleopatra (left) and Salome (right) have cemented remembrance of her as an exotically ethnic femme fatale.



**Figures I.5 (above); I.6 (right):** These two publicity images of Bara from the film *Sin* (Brenon, 1915) are among the most commonly reproduced images of the star.



**Figures I.7 and I.8:** The frequency with which Bara was photographed and filmed reclining seductively on chaise lounges, oriental carpets, and animal skins contributed to her star image as a sybaritic, wanton, and dangerous woman. The image on the right is from *A Fool There Was* (Powell, 1915); the image on the left is from an unidentified film.

Towards a goal of better understanding how and why audiences extract meaning and use from stars' images, my analysis of Bara finds its starting place in Richard Dyer's work and his position that stars perform a socio-political function far exceeding entertainment and with ramifications far beyond the entertainment industry. At the heart of much of Dyer's work on stardom is the conviction that stars matter "because they act out aspects of life that matter to us" (*Heavenly* 17). I find this a useful base on which to build, because while it indicates the importance of stardom as a social phenomenon, it is also broad enough to demand closer investigation of specific cultural effects resulting from the exchange between mass mediated personae, the varied and conflicting desires of media consumers, and the untold contingencies of meaning determined by context.

The loss or inaccessibility of Bara's films necessitates a different approach than conventional star studies methodologies. Rather than locating my primary object of study in matters such as performance, roles, or celebrity, I explore the star image as a vehicle by which audiences generate meanings and participate in the cultural discourse that may become part of cultural memory. In focusing on the discursive construction of a star's image and its meaning across cultural and temporal divides, I see my study as a way of extending the investigation of stars in a new direction. As such, my study examines Bara's star image less as a mirror reflecting social conditions and changes than as a *method* for media users to grapple with, make sense of, or even initiate those social changes.<sup>8</sup>

Conceiving of a star image in terms of a method supports a central theme of academic studies of stardom—that stars are in certain ways *useful* to audiences. Whether referred to as star phenomenon or what Richard deCordova has called star discourse, the socio-political import of celebrity and the polysemy of the star image are often analyzed vis-à-vis such concerns as

representation, consumption and consumerism, and audience identification with the star, both within the context of the cinematic narrative and in pro-filmic “everyday life.” Christine Gledhill provides an overview of some of the myriad functions stars can fill:

(A)n industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians. (xiii)

In addition to the uses Gledhill lists, I argue that the recurrence of Bara’s image in both mass and user-generated media gives insight into the manner in which audiences, through their consumption, personalization, and repurposing of mediated imagery, affect the formation and dissemination not only of cultural meanings but also cultural *memories*. Audience reaction to Bara over time indicates something of how media users’ affective responses and formation of identity through performances of taste—their consumer choices, voicing of opinions, sharing of stories and gossip, emulating stars’ styles and personae, and more rarely, creating artifacts such as scrapbooks, fan letters, diaries, fanzines, or artwork—shape cultural memory beyond simple remembrance of a star. Such performances of taste also embody and preserve information about a star’s historical context and disseminate ideas about a star’s socio-political functions that transcend specificities of time and place. I further explore how the multiplicity of significations, meanings, and uses generated by media consumption vie for recognition and retention in cultural memory.

## **Reception and Repurposing: Methodology and Intent**

In 1916, at the height of her popularity, the *New York Times* estimated, in a decidedly unscientific manner, that Bara attracted up to half a million filmgoers to theaters per day, translating to “182,000,000 persons in the course of a year” making up her audience (“Some 500,000”). Hyperbolic though such figures may be, they speak to the breadth of appeal she held for audiences, in spite of the controversial, and for some audiences offensive, aspects of her character type. Understanding the significance of a star like Bara to social, cultural, and cinema history, however, demands an examination of what such audience attendance numbers, box office receipts, and placements in popularity polls represent. Therefore, I find that a reception studies approach to Bara’s fame and remembrance is particularly valuable in answering questions about the cultural function of stardom.

A focus on reception, as Tim Bergfelder notes, uncovers “a multitude of different ‘texts’ and meanings” which he sees as “mediating historically determined positions, aesthetic conventions and expectations, social and other public discourses, and marketing strategies” (69-70). Adapting a method Judith Newton terms “cross-cultural montage,” a form of analysis that “relates the primary text to nontraditional objects and artifacts crucial to that text’s reception history” (Erb 9), I take a diachronic approach in analyzing the exchange between media, audiences, and context. I find the cultural phenomena surrounding and stemming from Bara’s image to be rich and informative sites of inquiry into the role of the media in the production of both individual identity and socio-political conditions. Although she maintained a sort of popular culture parlance, in which her name was synonymous with absurd extravagance and overwrought seductiveness, until roughly the 1970s, the remembrance and especially the repurposing of Bara has in many ways been a non-mainstream phenomenon. Cynthia Erb’s assertion that reception

studies can be “more attentive to historical readings produced ‘from the margins’” (5) thus further emphasizes the significance of this method to my study.

The complexity of such matters, however, demands a cross-disciplinary approach. While reception studies is the methodological constant that unifies my exploration, my study also draws heavily upon star studies, media studies, and memory studies; it is further informed by, among others, gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, and semiotics. As an exercise in film history, I also hope that my study will raise questions about the historiographic practices of the discipline. My approach is not just a sampling from a buffet of topics and methods; each of the disciplines on which I draw helps untangle a particular aspect of stars’ cultural meanings, social relevance, and effect on individual perceptions, for such matters are closely bound up with one another and cannot be understood in their complexity through a single discursive lens. My investigation into media consumers’ capacity to influence the content and dissemination of cultural memory, for instance, has obvious connections to memory studies and history, but also necessitates consideration of the media’s impact on memory formation, and gender and cultural studies to understand the dynamics that precipitate fluctuations, suppressions, and rediscoveries of information about the past.

Along with this, the ethnographic methods I use in Chapters Three and Four inform and support my argument that media-consumers-as-producers contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage through their actions and their voicing of interpretations and ideas. As Erb writes, an ethnographic methodology “can achieve something other reception approaches cannot: it can help us describe viewers as social agents never completely harnessed by the practices of the film industry” (163). For each different consideration of how and why stars matter, the

combination of disciplinary methods works together, some coming to the fore with one set of inquiries, while making way for other disciplinary concerns in assessing another set of inquiries.

In putting historical reception studies and star discourse into dialogue with cultural memory, my methodological focus has been influenced and aided by a number of particularly valuable interdisciplinary studies: Dyer's contextualization of star images in his study *Heavenly Bodies*; Erb's work on the abundance of cultural meanings generated by reworkings of King Kong; Maland's examination of the reception of Charlie Chaplin across political, cultural, and economic changes; Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's analysis of James Bond's recirculation in cultural discourse and the contingencies of meaning; and Robert Kapsis's study of the construction of Alfred Hitchcock's reputation as an auteur. Each of these scholars is a model of conducting purposeful, carefully scrutinized, synchronic and diachronic analyses through deep exploration of a single subject. Each also demonstrates keen insight into the evaluation of key contextual factors, drawing compelling conclusions about various facets of reception, including the polysemy, intertextuality, legacy, influence, and reuse of mediated images.

Although I seek to extend the scholarly inquiries initiated by these studies, I feel my dissertation differs from these earlier works and makes a unique contribution to film and media studies in three principal ways. The first is a deeper exploration of *specific* and *individual* responses to and interpretations of star images, working towards a sense of how personal use of media texts, adapted to match one's own needs and interests, can contribute to collective remembrance. Reading evidence of audiences' reception of popular culture in this way reveals a historical record that grants access to the smaller, more intimate moments of the past. To this end, part of my study incorporates interview materials from several individuals interested in

Bara, many reviving and reworking her image in ways that exemplify how media consumption contributes to cultural remembrance.<sup>9</sup>

The second distinction is my emphasis on emotion and affect as essential to understanding the cultural, political, and historical significance of reception. Of these two considerations, *affect* more aptly describes my informants' responses to Bara than *emotion*. As Matt Hills describes the two concepts, emotion is "object directed" and "occurrent," connected to and evoked by specific interactions of which the subject is aware and capable of evaluating. Affect, on the other hand, is "objectless," or at least not in response to a clearly definable source or occurrence (*Pleasures* 13). Affect can arouse "feelings that are cognitively impenetrable," such as mood, atmosphere, or sensation rather than the more clearly recognizable emotional responses such as happiness, sadness, etc. (*Pleasures* 19). Significantly, however, Hills indicates that the distinction between affect and emotion is not always clear, and proposes that they should not be regarded "as opponents, but as processual partners" (ibid. 28).

Hills also sees affect as exceeding direct interaction with a text, "spilling outside the experiential time" and lingering in a subject's consciousness (ibid. 27). With Bara, a specific "object" that might arouse emotion is often hard to locate, in part because experiencing her image is largely a matter of pastiche, in which the consumer of her image is compiling different fragments of intertextual materials to form an impression.

With interpretive acts shifting across a continuum, the fragmented character of Bara's image could theoretically push viewers towards a more "personal" conception of the star than with viewing films, which is likelier to delimit the individual's interpretations, in part by drawing forth an *emotional* response to the star as a character within a narrative. While a few of my informants were able to articulate an emotional connection to Bara, most expressed their



attachment to her in affective terms: an interest, admiration, or attraction based on her look, her persona, aspects of her biography, or a general notion of “what she means” to them.

Affect is likely to be the dominant factor determining an individual’s interpretation and use of a star image, and in cultural memory as well as personal, meaning is tied to affective response. In the cultural space where audience reception, with all of its contradictions and contingencies, and the construction of memory intersect, affective response thus also plays a fundamental role in determining *if* and *how* media texts will be remembered, and *if* and *how* those texts will continue to be culturally viable when unmoored from their original contexts in their subsequent cross-contextual applications. I contend that Bara exemplifies the capacity for a star not merely to be remembered, but to communicate something to and therefore be open to reevaluation and reuse by audiences over time, including new and perhaps unexpected affective/emotional connections between a star of the past and audiences of the present.

The third way in which I seek to expand the existing discourse on stardom derives from a concept central to my dissertation: *repurposing*, the term I use to investigate how and why media consumers appropriate and remake old forms, such as Bara, by infusing them with new meanings to fit new uses.<sup>10</sup> As with the ecological and economic connotations of repurposing, such acts of “fixing” old or obsolete media for the use at hand indicates resourcefulness and motivation on the part of the repurposer. The cultural presence and viability of a media image is of course tied to the degree to which it is consumed by mass audiences, but I propose that remembrance of that image over time is more likely to result from a certain *kind* rather than amount of consumption. Media audiences, through conscientious and what Jean Burgess and Joshua Green term “creative” consumption (14), have the capacity to influence their own social realities, including

the creation and dissemination of information, interpretations, and memories they deem important—a process that is made visible in acts of repurposing.

John Hartley proposes a related term, *redaction*, that I find useful in thinking about the individual and collective mindsets that prompt active and selective use of media texts—uses that foreground some things while screening off others through processes of deconstructing, poaching, or repurposing. Redaction is Hartley’s way of explaining how media consumers extract personal meaning from the overwhelming amount of mediated information that surrounds us at all times. He emphasizes that the “redactional mode” of making meaning from this media overload is a “creative process, but an editorial not an authorial one,” and is a “textual practice” of “bringing existing materials together to make new texts and meanings” (*Television* 25-6). He makes the case that contemporary society is characterized by the practice of redaction, which adapts “the processes of corporate and governmental shaping of existing materials to make sense of the world” (ibid.112) and sorting out “order from the chaos” (ibid.113).

Because repurposing of media texts requires cognizance of a text’s intertextual surround and reinterpretation of its cultural significance, it may be regarded as an outgrowth of the redactional practices Hartley describes. Amelie Hastie’s conception of *recollection* adds yet another nuance to understanding how the interplay of intertextuality and remembrance creates new forms of knowledge and new ways of knowing. Recollection, in her usage, refers not only to remembering as a cognitive process, but more literally to the re-collecting of information, particularly that held within tangible artifacts, into new configurations that reformulate what we know about film history (11). Hastie describes how several female stars have performed such acts of recollection, arguing that film history (and the stars’ own remembrance) are “authored through the intertextual work of writings, films, and other visual and ephemeral collections,”

including the unconventional, under-recognized texts these stars produced through their recollection (12). Although Hastie's study focuses on the influence of stars on history and memory, audiences of those stars extend knowledge and remembrance in even more unanticipated ways through their own acts of collection and recollection.

Drawing on the evidence presented in the following chapters, I argue that the dynamics of audience responses such as redaction, recollection, and repurposing have had considerable influence not only on Bara simply being remembered, but also in expanding the scope of likely interpretations—and by extension the potential usefulness—of her image. This corresponds to a change in what Hans Robert Jauss has called the *horizon of expectations*, or parameters of reception, that he sees as constituted for the subject “from out of a tradition or series of previously known works, and from a specific attitude, mediated by one (or more) genre and dissolved through new works” (79). In light of Jauss's theorization of the changeable nature of these horizons, Maland explains that texts have “no intrinsic history and meaning except to the extent that successive audiences respond to them.” In considering the interplay between audience response and horizons of expectations, Maland identifies a key facet of Jauss's theory that makes it especially pertinent to the analysis of Bara's image and its circulation, writing that it “helps clarify how an artist's career unfolds temporally and how a culture's response to an artist's work is cumulative, shifting, and multifaceted” (xvi).

Over time, the horizons of expectation for Bara's image have altered dramatically. Despite a history of ethnic and gender inequality concurrent with Bara's rise to fame, and running throughout the subsequent decades in which new audiences have discovered her, her star image has been put to a remarkable number of uses. Among those uses is the symbolization of many different cultural fears, desires, and aspirations, sometimes in a way that upholds the

predominant discourse of the time, and sometimes in a way that challenges that discourse and calls matters of inequality into question. That these competing discourses were often co-existent, and frequently interdependent, demonstrates the kind of polysemy that keeps a star's image viable across varying social, political, and historical contexts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, at different times and for different audiences, Bara has been interpreted as an indicator of societal decadence and moral decay; a groundbreaking representation of unrepressed sexual freedom and pleasure; a misogynistic representation of men's fear of women; a "reclaimed" figure of feminist empowerment; a racist embodiment of the dehumanizing effects of exotification and Orientalism; a figure of admiration for ethnic minorities; an anti-Semitic caricature; an emblem of pride in Jewish heritage; an antiquated, unintentionally laughable exemplar of "old Hollywood" excess in both performance and promotion; evidence of the naïveté of the people of a less enlightened past; a misunderstood victim of the Hollywood system; an icon of kitsch; an example, as with Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe, of the toll taken by an incompatibility between the public persona and the "real self"; a model for countercultural rebellion and subversive reinvention of the self; a failure; a success.

Keeping in mind questions of how individuals make both media texts and cultural memories "their own," along with how they contribute to and extract meaning from cultural memory, my investigation into Bara's image looks at how the kind of grassroots cultural work that's been hailed as an outgrowth of new media has long existed in earlier analog forms—forms that have preserved not only the memory of a particular text, but have set up the conditions that help or hinder the cultural viability and usefulness of the remembered texts. Thus, I am particularly interested in questions of how consumers become active *users* of media product, and perhaps come to recognize that the choices and actions, including repurposing, springing from

their expressions of taste and affective attachment, can have larger and lasting socio-cultural repercussions.

In addition to fostering a sense of agency through a more purposeful interaction with the media and engagement with cultural discourse, acts of repurposing may also prompt media users to cultivate greater concern for the preservation of film and media heritage—itsself a matter rife with political consequences. By looking across temporal and cultural contexts at specific examples of media audiences’ practices of consumption, collection, and communication of both information and material objects, I make a case that such practices are modes of remembrance. This indicates what I feel is at stake in my study: various factors, requiring evaluation, aid or inhibit individuals’ participation in the kinds of discourse that contribute to representation and remembrance. Moreover, these are very often the same factors that influence whether cultural discourses reinforce or call into question hegemonic systems of control.

The intent of my study is therefore to uncover evidence, from both historical and current-day audiences, and combining primary source research with ethnographic methods, of *who has contributed to* the interlinked processes of building cultural memory and of reevaluating the past’s impact on the present. I argue that audiences, through their interaction with the media and the resultant expressions of taste, knowledge, and affective attachments, and through that which they have saved, created, remembered, collected, and repurposed, have long served as amateur archivists, preservationists, and curators of cultural heritage. Such actions represent important cultural work not only in preserving artifacts and information that might otherwise have been lost, but also in maintaining the conditions by which new audiences might expand upon the range of meanings and uses of older popular cultural images. While this argument will be made more specifically in Chapter Four, it is a relevant idea throughout the dissertation.

The remainder of this introduction pursues an argument that frames the cultural history and reception study of Bara within the subsequent chapters: audience use and reuse of popular culture can serve as a historical record. Discussing cases in which “stars seem to transcend historical fashions, enjoying continued popularity over different periods of time,” Paul McDonald emphasizes, “the image of a star is nevertheless still historically transformed” (*Star System* 7)—a situation that makes a star like Bara, and the remembrance and reuse of her image over time, particularly telling of cultural changes and their social impact.

Further, through historical reception studies it is possible to discover an *alternative* or *revisionist* historical record by looking at audience responses “from the margins.” As George Lipsitz argues, popular culture frequently takes its cues from “the alternate archives of history, the shared memories, experiences, and aspirations of ordinary people, whose perspectives rarely appear in formal historical archival collections” (*Footsteps* xi). Making the case that polysemy has been the precondition for remembering and repurposing Bara’s image, I also outline the aspects of the image that have made it particularly useful for this kind of study, and explore why this particular movie star of nearly a century ago is still remembered and taken up for acts of repurposing when dozens of other silent-era stars, including many who were equally popular with audiences of the past, are long forgotten by all but the most dedicated silent film devotees.<sup>12</sup> Before this, however, it is important to explain why the concept of cultural memory is so central to my investigation.

### **Polysemic Pasts: Defining Cultural Memory**

Reception studies show us that a media consumer’s response is situational as well as individualistic; a star image might convey one meaning at a particular time, and another, possibly

conflicting, meaning at another time, both for the individual and for the group. Subjecting our own experiences as film viewers to analysis through “memory work,” according to Barbara Klinger, can lead to better understanding “of how we use films and other images and representations to make our selves, how we construct our own histories through memory, even how we position ourselves within wider, more public, histories” (*Beyond* 175). My dissertation questions what might happen if this same principle is applied to *collective* as well as *personal* memory, and what can happen when media consumers reflect on not only their *own* responses to and interpretations of media texts, but also those of other people in other contexts, including other time periods.

In its use throughout my study, cultural memory becomes a means of thinking through the complexities of how media influence remembrance; of why audience reactions to media change or stay the same over time; and of how audiences shape remembrance by replicating, modifying, undermining, rejecting, or parodying what is conveyed by mediated images. In short, cultural memory becomes a method for studying audiences’ relation to the past. Collective memory, in the words of Barbie Zelizer, “thrives on remaking the residue of past decades into material with contemporary resonance”—material that “offers resources for making sense of the past” and that “represents a graphing of the past as it is used for present aims” (217).

The concept of cultural memory derives from the work of Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist who developed the initial theories of *collective* memory in the 1920s, positing memory as a social phenomenon rather than an individual process.<sup>13</sup> Halbwachs’s principal thesis stems from the theory that very little “personal” memory is individuated and that it is impossible to “determine and retrieve recollections” outside the social constructs that shape how we see ourselves and others (43). These social “frameworks,” as Halbwachs refers to them,

therefore determine *what*, *how*, and even *when* one remembers. In what follows, I explore how this theory relates to Bara's memorability and the patterns of reception and repurposing that appear in different socio-historical contexts.

Whether regarded as tradition, history, or heritage,<sup>14</sup> collective memory is "a cultural construction, an elaborate network of narratives and texts (which include objects and ceremonial performances) that represents or explains the past" (Nathan 60), and is thus profoundly important in contributing to the construction and maintenance of a culture and its social order. Theories of collective memory, as they have been adapted and expanded upon in cultural studies, regard memories as discursive constructs and address the numerous cultural, social, and historical contingencies that influence memory formation, retention, or suppression, particularly the control exerted by a society's dominant ideologies over what is remembered and how it is remembered. Zelizer makes the case that in conceiving of memory as collective rather than individual, "Remembering becomes implicated in a range of other activities having as much to do with identity formation, power and authority, cultural norms, and social interaction as with the simple act of recall" (214). Because of this, memories, whether collective or the personal memories which contribute to collective memory, are inevitably political.

Collective memory, according to Daniel Nathan, is not a "natural" phenomenon, and likewise is neither "authentic" nor "disinterested," instead typically serving "the interests of those doing the remembering" (90). As Halbwachs argues, however, memory is not only an "instrument of social power" but also "an instrument of reconfiguration" (61). Examined with a reception studies approach, and mindful of the contingencies of meaning, memory therefore is never reducible to one form: as Zelizer puts it, "we all behave in the context of many narrative histories of the past" that shape our memories (235). Precisely because of its collaborative



nature, with the ongoing interplay between questioning, dissenting perspectives and the force of an always-changing popular opinion, collective memory theoretically works to both encourage and discourage individuated or alternative readings of culture and history. By investigating the myriad factors which influence remembering and forgetting, a cultural studies approach typically seeks to complicate the epistemological authority granted by terms such as “truth,” “reality,” and “history,” and thereby reveal historical vicissitudes disguised as ahistorical absolutes.

Although most of Halbwachs’s examples draw from institutional “collectives” such as family, religion, and social class, the idea of collective memory is relevant to individuals’ interactions with popular culture, in which economic, political, and social influences affect what gets remembered and how. The similarities are not directly correlative, however; because individuals theoretically have more input into the media they consume than over family heritage or religious teachings, they also have a potentially greater impact on the remembrances and meanings of popular culture. This suggests why memory studies scholar Marita Sturken advocates the use of the term “cultural” rather than “collective” memory, as a way of indicating areas of concern outside “formal historical discourse” that are “entangled” with cultural products, expressions, and their meanings (3).

Based on Sturken’s explanation, I find cultural memory a more pertinent concept to my study than collective memory.<sup>15</sup> Of course, cultural memory stems from individual memories, although there is a tendency for cultural memory to be dominated by those individual memories that have attained a degree of “authority” by reflecting a majority point of view. But cultural memory is not a monolithic construct. While I recognize that the specificities of cultural, social, and political contexts *do* influence what and how people remember, the concept of cultural memory better supports my contention that individuals have greater potential to contribute to and

shape the content and form of at least *some areas* of cultural memory than indicated by Halbwach's theory. In other words, while memories are socially constructed, they also amalgamate into cultural memory as filtered through the perceptions and experiences of various individual perspectives. Because identities are constructed with materials one encounters in the cultural surround, these individual perspectives are inevitably delimited by the socio-cultural context. However, each act of identity construction is, at least slightly, distinct. Thus, the complex interplay between individual and collective/cultural memories makes differentiation of one kind from another exceptionally tricky.

Cultural memory, according to Sturken, not only “defines a culture” but is also “the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed” (1). Importantly, she proposes that rather than “effacing” the individual in the collective process of remembrance, cultural memory “involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of cultural meaning” (1). As my research into Bara's reception has shaped my thoughts on cultural memory, I share Sturken's contention that collaboration is an intrinsic component. The contribution of a singular perspective to cultural memory may be a drop in the ocean, but at a localized, specialized, or subcultural “smaller pond” level, it may exert greater influence on others' memories and interpretations. It is this changeability at the micro-level that indicates how cultural memory is subject to revision and revitalization—and therefore how Bara's image has been adaptable to so many variations of repurposed meanings and uses.

Like Sturken, José van Dijck also expresses preference for the idea of cultural over collective memory, but makes different distinctions between the two terms. In explaining that her study focuses on “how memory works in constructing a sense of individual identity and collectivity at the same time,” van Dijck's emphasis on the effects of group memory on the

*individual* within a society rather than society at large appears to be the marker of *cultural* memory, while *collective* memory is more about analyzing the content of the “communal reservoir of relevant stories about our past and future” (8-9). She describes cultural memory as being able to account for the “mutuality of individual and collective” as well as the “negotiation or struggle to define individuality and collectivity” in the process through which “we shape ourselves” (12). Van Dijck parses the distinction even further by suggesting that there is a difference between cultural memory and *personal* cultural memory, which she defines as “the acts and products of remembering in which individuals engage to make sense of their lives in relation to the lives of others and to their surroundings, situating themselves in time and place” (6).

In both Sturken and van Dijck’s conceptions of cultural memory, the crucial point of analysis is the individual making sense of his or her relation to the socio-cultural surround, and his or her understanding of the available information about the past. The frequency with which one hears the old adage “History is written by the winners” indicates that it is common knowledge that there are multiple and sometimes inequitable ways of looking at the past, reporting the past, recording the past, and remembering the past. Noting that there are as many collective memories as there are groups, sociologist Lewis A. Coser writes, “It is, of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past” (22). Although Coser maintains that identification with a group directs an individual’s memory formation, we begin to see the possibility for (potentially productive) conflict within an individual’s system of thought if we consider Halbwachs’ common sense reminder that all individuals are concurrently members of several different groups (53). As this suggests, the transition from individual to cultural memory is never a direct one, and is always remade, again and again, in the ongoing

processes of transfer and transmission. Mass media, and the technologies which convey media texts, arguably now wield the greatest influence on the form and content of cultural remembrance.

### **Cultural Memory as a Historical Record**

Mass media not only reflect but also direct the formation of collective beliefs and identities. Lipsitz maintains that any form of “commercial culture” from any time period “registers change over time in important ways and serves as a vitally important repository for collective memory” (*Footsteps* viii). In this sense, Bara is a particularly compelling figure for investigation into the historical reception of stars and the role they play in media consumers’ everyday lives, in part simply because she *has* been remembered and repurposed for a considerable length of time. Consideration of the long span over which she has been remembered presents a vantage point from which one can observe the extraordinary socio-political changes of almost the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On this basis, I regard the variations in how Bara has been re-presented and received as a historical record that provides information about audiences’ responses to larger social and cultural conditions.

The diachronic nature of my study allows for evaluation of interpretations, remembrances, and uses of Bara’s star image that fluctuate between what Stuart Hall classifies as dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional decodings. Most of the readings of Bara I analyze fall into the category of negotiated readings, which Hall describes as “a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements,” a position that while still somewhat bound with hegemonic interpretations nonetheless “makes its own ground rules... (and) operates with exceptions to the rule,” albeit at a “more restricted, situational” level (175). Notably, Hall identifies contradiction

as a significant factor of negotiated decodings; as I will explore, contradictions run rampant in Bara's image and its reception.

Understanding how Bara's image has sustained certain types of dominant or "alternative" meaning provides insight into the shifting factors aiding or blocking various groups' participation in cultural discourse. Lipsitz argues that popular cultural texts are important objects of study because they resist "univocal interpretations and inscribed ideological closures because of the hurts of history" (*Time* 177). The "open-endedness" of Bara's image and its endlessly deferred meaning have kept it recirculating in cultural discourse, and I argue its adaptability in identifying and even redressing some of the "hurts of history" is an important reason it has retained a degree of viability for new audiences.

With this in mind, I examine Bara's star image as a means of assessing how varying social, political, economic, and historical conditions influence what gets remembered, by whom, and how. "The nature of social reality and the means to its transformation," Greil Marcus writes, are not necessarily located in interrogating power, "but in a long, clear look at the seemingly trivial gestures and accents of ordinary experience" (239),<sup>16</sup> including peoples' interactions with popular entertainment.

My investigation of media consumers' use of star images is thus concerned not simply with individual benefits or "empowerment" found in extracting personal meaning from mass media texts, but with how such acts of consumption contribute to the remembrance of those texts and their potential social, political, and cultural implications over a span of time.

Memory studies provides insight into how such small, individual acts of remembrance influence the writing of history. A number of scholars investigating the intersection of mass media reception and cultural memory have theorized memory as a socially acquired

amalgamation subject to constant restructuring of form, content, and purpose. Nathan regards collective memory (the term he uses) as a “dynamic phenomenon created and modified by individuals and institutions in specific contexts” (60). In this interpretation, memory is not only formed socially, but also *used* socially. Further, cultural memory theorists, from Halbwachs on, have emphasized that the *present* is far more determinative of a memory’s form and content than the past. Memory is contingent; the time and place in which one recalls a favorite media text is one of the principal influences on what that text means.

This, of course, has significant impact on media reception’s function as a historical record. As Coser indicates, identification with certain groups, places, or time periods can have more influence on the form memory takes than lived experience, and in turn on the content of the historical record informed by memories. In her ethnographic study of elderly British moviegoers and their memories of film experiences in their youth, Annette Kuhn demonstrates these complexities and contingencies of remembering. She sees the process of recalling and recounting memories as a means by which her informants “construct themselves,” even if the imperfections of memory and the inevitable influence of countless subsequent encounters with mass media have clouded over the exact events of the “real” experience (*Dreaming* 58).

Kuhn proposes that some memories which on the surface appear to be about filmgoing may not in fact recall one’s own experience with cinema, but other types of memory shaped by other experiences—particularly experiences with a strong affective component. Paraphrasing Alessandro Portelli, Kuhn states, “personal ‘truth’ may coincide with shared ‘imagination’” (ibid. 61). Because the construction of cultural meanings and memories are inseparable, Kuhn finds “film texts may be conceptualized as discourses caught up in and informing contexts, and vice versa” (ibid. 5). This is borne out by her informants’ personal narratives. Recollection and

the emotional experiences relived in memory, Kuhn maintains, typically have less to do with the specific content of a film than with the particulars of the experience of viewing that film. As such, film may be only a touchstone within memories that are much more about one's social and cultural experiences of a certain time and place.

Thus, Kuhn argues that "cinema memory" goes beyond self definition to reveal a "collective viewpoint" in which certain commonalities of lived experience influence what individuals deem significant about films and filmgoing experiences, and therefore what is remembered (ibid. 60). These common cultural determinants may affect the construction of memory at the time of the source occurrence, or instigate changes in memory over time. Ultimately, Kuhn concludes that the kind of memory narratives shared by her informants are a type of historical "evidence" whose "power and value" lie not so much in what they reveal about the individual as in "the insights they yield about the collective imagination of a generation" (ibid. 219).

Although the experience of actually seeing any of Bara's films in their original theatrical screenings has most likely already passed from living memory, I still find Kuhn's conclusions relevant in analyzing what patterns of reception and reuse of Bara's image can tell us about the "collective imagination" and cultural conditioning attendant upon new generations of audiences' interactions with older media texts. One particularly intriguing instance stems from remembrance, whether in standard film histories or passed down "received knowledge," of the manner in which Bara's star image was built up and publicized in the 1910s. Much of this knowledge and remembrance of Bara's promotion and reception, both important components of her overall image, is in fact untrue and not borne out by my primary research. I was, in fact, initially rather disappointed to find that the actual publicity stories from the 1910s, while

undeniably kooky, were comparatively restrained and not quite as sensationalistic as most film histories had led me to anticipate. The modifications over time to information about how Bara was publicized and received, however, might actually tell us far more about the dominant attitudes and beliefs subsequent eras held about the past than about the original object of historical inquiry.

A taste for the entertaining extremity of the convoluted “legend” engineered by Fox Film Corporation’s publicity department to promote their mystery woman star, combined with a tendency to imagine people of the past as “simpler” (that is, gullible and unsophisticated), has meant that the publicity campaign stories, as well as historical audiences’ level of belief in them, have been highly embellished over time, becoming more colorful and more excessive in retellings. What we know of Bara and her original audiences has come to us like a “whisper down the lane” game, in which the original utterance is altered by degrees as it transfers from individual to individual, so that by the end it becomes something very different. This is, in itself, significant in terms of historical data. As Sturken argues, “We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present” (2), as a means for making sense of the competing narratives vying for reification as history.

Collectively generated memory is, as this suggests, in Zelizer’s words, “both more mobile and mutable than history” (216). She further describes the capacity for collective memory to remake the past, saying that it can “help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it.” Concern with “historical accuracy and authenticity,” according to Zelizer, is “pushed aside to accommodate other issues, such as those surrounding the establishment of social identity, authority, solidarity, political affiliation” (217). While this is undeniably frustrating in terms of “knowing” the past, analyzing the sequence of alterations with



attention to the context spurring those changes is highly instructive in uncovering the ways history is told, compiled, and written, and by extension, how cultural memory is formed.

Decades of entanglement of facts, fabrications, and altered remembrances of Bara's life, career, and publicity have meant that separating "true" from "false" can be futile—a situation acknowledged by Ronald Genini and Eve Golden, authors of biographies on Bara. Works of film history have long presented bits of press stories and exaggerated remembrances as historical facts, which in turn are repeated in and reinforced by subsequent accounts. My study of Bara is not overly concerned with separating what is "true" from what is fabricated in the various historical accounts, remembrances, or purported interviews with Bara (that may be her words or may be the words of a publicist). Rather, I am interested in what those fabrications can tell us about audiences' relationship with the phenomenon of stardom and the effect star images can have on everyday lives. A star's manufactured persona, according to Ian Jarvie, "is, sociologically, a real thing" (178) and therefore, in many questions about the cultural work of stardom, is far more important politically and historically than whatever "truth" exists behind the star image.

In a barrage of press reports, interviews, and marketing campaigns, audiences of the mid-1910s were told that Bara was born in Egypt, "in the shadow of the Sphinx" or "on the sands of the Sahara," that she was already a major star in Europe, that she dabbled in spiritualism and the occult, and that men had been driven to suicide out of unrequited love for "Mlle. Bara." Most of the modifications to this original publicity and Bara's image seem to be cases of "upping the ante" of sensationalism in order to simultaneously distance the present from a strange and quaint past, while also reshaping the media of the past to be more interesting to contemporary viewpoints. Tales of Bara's supposed exotic, non-Western genealogy, for instance, have been a

part of a retrospective reimagining of the Fox PR campaign, in which she was initially promoted less-threateningly as European, usually French-Italian, before the contrived open secret of her American Midwestern origin was “revealed.” The stories that have become standard film history of Bara being touted as the daughter of an Arabian or Egyptian princess, dancing girl, or slave, for example, were not part of the actual publicity, which reported that her mother was a French actress working in Egypt. Time and re-remembrance may also have fused publicity reports with Bara’s roles of Cleopatra (Figure I.9) and Salome (Figure I.10), and the numerous extant photographs of her in fantastic Orientalist costuming.



**Figure I.9**



**Figure I.10**

Likewise, Bara was never heavily promoted as being the same treacherous siren offscreen as on, and the famed marketing gimmick of her name being an anagram of “Arab Death” was not a major part of her publicity—it was more of an amused observation made roughly at the time

*Cleopatra* was released and wasn't intended to signal a "truth" about the star's character or ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> The gradual addition over time of more sex (as sexuality became less taboo), more "exotic" foreignness (as non-European ethnicities became "thrilling" to Americans), and more extremity (as audiences became more jaded) to Bara's image thus reflects changing frameworks of reception and what is required to keep a cultural text vibrant and useful.

Accounting for the contradictory reactions to and uses of Bara's image returns us to the issue of stars' ability to simultaneously reinforce and challenge social conventions. While memory studies scholars have frequently used theories of collective memory in locating and investigating the social factors shaping memory, these theories can also be extended to an analysis of what subjects might be able to do with memory *in spite of* or *in response to* ideological frameworks. In this sense both individual and collective memory, as well as the cultural artifacts which metaphorically "contain" and therefore prompt remembrance, are made available to a varied, if bounded, field of interpretations through which individuals participate in giving meaning to the past and in conceptualizing its influence on the present and future. Dyer employs the term *structured polysemy* to describe the culturally imposed limitations on interpretation of media texts. These limitations can influence reception of the star image in such a way that certain "meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced," thereby heightening their capacity to transmit ideological messages (*Stars* 3). Audiences, Dyer contends, "cannot make media images mean anything they want to," but he also determines that they "can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions that work for them" (*Heavenly* 4).<sup>18</sup>

Van Dijck proposes a similar idea about individuals' capacity to work with mediated images in spite of their position inside ideology. She insists that "the very presence of cultural

forms incites individual expression,” arguing that what could be seen as a constraint is in fact a source of “creative energy” out of which individuals shape “their own histories and subjectivities in response to existing cultural frameworks” (8). “Memory filtered through the prism of culture,” she maintains, “acknowledges the idea that individual expressions are articulated as part of, as much as in spite of, larger collectivities; individuality can be traced in every negotiation of collectivity—past and present—as it is always a response to all previous representations” (13-14).

I’m interested in exploring the long-term socio-political effects of the negotiations to which van Dijck refers and the selectivity Dyer references, and how they relate to the construction of what we know about the past and its peoples. What is particularly relevant to my study is Dyer’s contention that the parameters of structured polysemy have a temporal dimension, and “images develop or change over time” (*Stars* 64). Consideration of an individual’s involvement in this process must recognize and take into account that the raw materials that may be picked up and adopted as memory are both determined and delimited by certain cultural conditions. The central concern here is the inevitability of the individual as a media consumer and the tremendous influence the media exert on the formation of both personal and cultural memory. In describing how media facilitate access to cultural memory and aid in its transmission, Zelizer not only regards the media as a “warehouse” for memory, but also writes of medias’ “enormous reconstructive potential” on remembrance (233). A number of scholars, including Sturken, Alison Landsberg, and Victor Burgin, further theorize that the media may even *create* our memories, surrounding us with the simulacra of lived experience: Sturken, for instance, uses the example of Vietnam War veterans who are no longer able to distinguish what

in their memory of the war emerges from lived experience and what they have intercepted from films about the war.

Postmodern theory, as Graeme Burton points out, makes no distinction between lived experience and mediated experience: “views of realism and of a social reality separated from television reality are suspended as being meaningless—because actually, it is argued, the experience of television is as real as life experience” (40). “Real life” may not be quite the Baudrillardian dystopia Burton describes, but interaction with the media unarguably influences memory. The mediated “memories” incorporated into the ways a culture imagines itself and its history include various narratives and representations, in which fact and fiction are obscured, that can exert a covert ideological coercion as they move from the mass media into the minds and memories of individuals and the group. Moreover, the narrative clarity of memories generated by the entertainment industries, in which rigidly populist beliefs remain unchallenged, can be especially recalcitrant in the face of counter-narratives and ideological challenges. As Klinger indicates, memories are so shaped and influenced by the dominant discourse that they may not be significantly different than the cultural narratives that shore up hegemonic structures (*Beyond* 133). Explaining a concept proposed by Jacques Derrida, Anne Whitehead states that a “discernable discrimination” affects the exchange between memory and writing, determining who gets to write “and who is then subsequently absorbed into the archive,” with gender, class, and race being among the factors determining representation (10).

Lack of awareness or reluctance to question standard accounts of the past or simulated experiences of the past “lived” through media consumption points towards a hovering issue in my study: nostalgia. Understood as a longing for a romanticized past, nostalgia is, as David Lowenthal states, “memory with the pain removed” (8). Nostalgia is problematic in this regard,

Klinger writes, because it can become “empowered to tell the nation’s story,” but it “operates through what historiographers call ‘selective memory’—a pointedly partial retelling that often results, as Frederic Jameson argues, in a ‘chronological laundering’ and neutralization of the past” (*Beyond* 103).

John Bodnar’s exploration of how World War II has been remembered as “the good war” exemplifies this kind of neutralization. Over time and through numerous media representations, he argues, the war has been transformed into an American myth that glorifies certain characteristics and values presented as a consensual and unifying part of the national identity. Bodnar demonstrates, however, how decades of mediated historical accounts and remembrances have smoothed away the dissent, uncertainty, and other ambiguities of Americans’ multivalent responses to the war. By the end of the twentieth century, “The jumbled outlooks of the wartime generation had now been simplified by the passage of time,” and critical viewpoints on the war held by people with direct experience of the conflict are buried along with them. Notably, Bodnar sees younger generations’ nostalgia and romanticization of World War II as a means of redeeming a nationalist narrative and image after the “more troubling legacy” of subsequent wars (200).

Lowenthal posits a connection between nostalgia and nationalism, reactionary politics, and commodification of the past, stating that many people “seem less concerned to find a past than to yearn for it, eager not so much to relive a fancied long-ago as to collect its relics and celebrate its virtues” (7). Nonetheless, he also maintains individuals’ attitudes towards the past are often ambiguous: “Explicit avowals of admiration or disdain conceal their opposites; reverence for tradition underlies destructive iconoclasm; retrospective nostalgia coexists with impatient modernism” (35).

In spite of how neutralized the medias' representations of people, events, and ideas are, ambiguity, inconsistency, and volatility always factor into reception. Engagement with the past may or may not involve idealizing it by decrying the present and future. Further, contingency always keeps interpretations and reinterpretations of the past in a state of flux. Use of the past and modifications to cultural memory are neither inherently reactionary nor progressive. Cultural memory, and the individual viewpoints through which it is constructed, may be delimited by socio-political determinants, but different individuals understand those factors differently, and their responses may or may not support the cultural hierarchies that dominant discourses reinforce. Zelizer contends that the "multi-purpose nature" of memory makes it "too wide-ranging to be encompassed by one analytical framework" that might determine the extent of the purposes memory serves (230). All of these considerations inevitably factor into the ways audience reception and remembrance can function as both standard and alternative historical records.

### **Countermemory, Revisionist Memory, and the Alternative Historical Record**

"Public media and official archives memorialize the experiences of the powerful," Whitehead writes, commenting that this situation has necessitated turning to "alternative archives," such as oral accounts, in order "to hear the voices of women and other disenfranchised groups" (13). Because oral accounts can be even more fleeting than many of the other already ephemeral acts and artifacts that may comprise "alternative archives," however, any gesture towards compiling a total history incorporating all perspectives (impossible though this may be) must seek evidence in overlooked and unexpected places. It is here that evidence of repurposed star images may be particularly useful, bearing in mind that the changes and variations to an existent star image

came from *somewhere*, originating possibly at a truly “grassroots” level. Repurposed images indicate that they have been modified for a *reason*—a reason that may reveal something of significance about the cultural-historical context that prompted the act of repurposing, as well as the circumstances of the modified image’s reception.

The broad and contradictory array of readings and uses of Bara’s image points to the concept of countermemory, an idea important to the exploration of both cultural memory as an alternative historical record and the capacity for popular culture to be repurposed by audiences. The concept of countermemory derives from Michel Foucault’s work, which was described by *Cahiers du cinéma* as “a systematic attempt to restore to light what officialdom conceals, what lies forgotten in the black archives of the ruling class” (Foucault, “Film” 25). Countermemory, as Foucault proposes in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” is a use of the “historical sense” that “severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model,” and transforms history “into a totally different form of time” (365). As Sturken glosses the term, Foucault intended for the concept of countermemory to “signify memories that work against official discourse” (261, note 6). It must be noted, however, as evidenced by Holocaust deniers, extremist Neo-Confederates, and the like, not every remembrance that can be described as “counter,” or every attempt to revise the standard historical accounts, represents a progressive, more inclusive change.

Memory, according to Foucault, “is actually a very important factor in struggle” (“Film” 26). He saw film and television, however, as apparatuses obstructing the formation of “popular memory”—the ways the working classes and the disempowered have of “recording history, or remembering it, of keeping it fresh and using it.” Mass media, in his view, “reprogrammed” popular memory by showing people “not what they were, but what they must remember having



been” (ibid. 25). Nonetheless, Foucault did seem to find potential for countermemory in certain media texts, referring specifically to French films such as *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (Ophüls, 1969) and *Lacombe, Lucien* (Malle, 1974) that introduced ambiguity into standard historical accounts by investigating the extent of France’s collaboration with Nazis during World War II; he referred to these as films that could let one “find out what you have to remember” (ibid. 26).

While this complicates the perceived incompatibility between popular memory and the media, Nathan adds further complexity by warning that a binary between oppressive “official” narratives and resistant countermemories is an overly reductive way of thinking: one must account for the fact that dominant and subordinate narratives and memories may shift their positions over time, and that *multiple* dominant versions sometimes exist simultaneously (86). Understood in these terms, the relationship between cultural memory and cultural countermemory can be seen more accurately as a dynamic than a dialectic, with a series of ascents, descents, and back-and-forth shifts rather than a synthesis of conflicting ideas that result in a pervasive new way of interpreting the past.

With Bara, one of the key matters of concern is how this dynamic affects the parameters of structured polysemy, especially its effect on the visibility and potential meanings of the multiple inconsistencies within her image—a topic that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter One. Although countermemories are not “encoded” into Bara’s image, that image has prompted varying patterns of reception and reuse that may represent the shift of a memory from counter to mainstream, or vice versa. Attention to this aspect of her reception in particular is an important means of locating non-dominant or “subcultural” audience responses and, by holding them up in comparison to “mainstream” readings, drawing conclusions about the cultural work done by audiences through use of stars.

Describing the kind of temporal dynamism that makes such contrasts more visible, Dyer notes that the passage of time affects the social, cultural, and historical construction of “typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society” as they are represented by stars (*Heavenly* 15-6). Gledhill articulates a similar conception of the constant changes to stars’ cultural function, writing, “stars offer not fixed meanings nor role models but a focus in the continuous production and struggle to define and redefine desires, meanings and identities” (xix). The various remembrances and repurposings of Bara’s image, I argue, demonstrate how star images’ capacity to interrogate the social order can be heightened by the passage of time and its effect in laying bare the ideological trappings that determine matters such as structured polysemy and reception.

Adapting geographical terminology as a metaphor for this kind of historical inquiry, Marcus Reddiker and Peter Linebaugh describe the often hidden influences that determine the force and impact of historical events in terms of the “long fetch” that precedes the breaking of a wave. Just as the physical conditions determining the length, height, and strength of a cresting wave are typically obscured by physical and temporal distance from its point of origin, the hidden history of popular cultural expressions, as Lipsitz maintains, becomes a “repository for collective memory” and a potentially invisible influence on future expressions and meanings (*Footsteps* viii).

The hidden history of popular cultural *reception*, too, I would add, is at least as vital in terms of collective remembrance and the capacity for those popular cultural expressions to sustain varied meanings and uses. By exploring the “long fetch” behind Bara’s reception and reuse, we can see how her image has been a focal point “for the expression of desires suppressed in other spheres” (*Footsteps* xv), and why audience expression of such desires matter politically

and historically. Maland addresses this aspect of reception in his investigation of how Chaplin's current canonical status as an "untouchable" genius is the result of a series of historical fluctuations, and indeed is still subject to socio-political changes. Observing that stars' images are meaningful to people in culturally patterned ways, Maland analyzes the numerous socio-historical contingencies in the United States that contributed to a cultural climate in which "The dangerous leftist of the 1950s (could) become the wronged genius of the 1970s" (337). Concluding his study with an examination of unauthorized uses of Chaplin's image after his death, Maland makes clear that neither stars, studios, publicists, nor advertisers have much control over the meanings communicated by stars' images; while the after-death appropriation of a star's image keeps that image alive, it does so in ways that may be completely removed from the texts through which that image was initially constructed.

This example also illustrates how cultural memory serves not solely as some kind of preservative, but how circulation through cultural memory—or subcultural memory—activates materials from the past, bringing to the fore formerly non-dominant meanings, those concealed by the dictates of the structured polysemy of past eras, or entirely new and unanticipated ways of reading and making use of an image. Star images "work," Dyer contends, in part through their ability to "speak" to us about things we find important, and in ways that we can understand (*Heavenly* 14). I would append the argument that this applies to *remembrance* of star images as well, with their memorability tied to the perceived use value of a memory, or particular aspects of that memory.

In his discussion of Lena Horne, Dyer presents a compelling example of how cross-cultural reception and cross-temporal recollection heighten the potential for star images to raise questions about the "natural order." As Dyer describes Horne's image, he notes that she

purposefully coupled her beauty and gracefulness with a “sophisticated aloofness” and distance that served as a protection against the hostilities of a racist society while also “denaturalizing” racist stereotypes about the overt sexuality of black women (*Heavenly* 15). When considered from a post-civil rights era perspective, Horne’s star image also functions at broader socio-political levels, becoming invested with considerable force not only in indicting a racist past, but in pointing to similar issues as they continue in supposedly more enlightened times. Further, the way Horne might have been interpreted particularly by African American audiences of the 1940s and 50s—as a groundbreaker, a role model, a heroine—is now more likely to be among the primary ways she is read and remembered by audiences regardless of race. Similarly, it’s arguable that a third-wave feminist “reclamation” of Bara’s image as a historical, if campy, symbol of female unruliness is at this historical moment a more likely reading than ones that have, accurately or not, been perceived as dominant in the past, stoking moral panic over women’s independence and sexuality, or reinforcing nativist hostility towards foreigners.

This shift from marginal reading to mainstream is an instance of a countermemory depending on the remembrance of earlier interpretations for its meaning. The cultural incisiveness of ostensibly feminist or empowering recollections of the Bara image is amplified rather than undermined by remembrance of the image’s ostensibly sexist or racist implications in the past, given its spark by the ironic contradiction of its new use. But the recollection of the image in new ways and the repurposing of it for new contexts is far more likely to be tied to matters of taste, identity, and affect than to any sort of conscientious manipulation for political critique. In his adaptation of Foucault’s conception of countermemory, Lipsitz appears to take this into account. Tacitly in agreement with Foucault’s central conviction that standard historical accounts attempt to legitimize acts of oppression and injustice by making them appear inevitable,

Lipsitz strays from Foucault in focusing on acts of collective memory unifying individuals within a group rather than enforcing systems of power and control. In particular, he is interested in how the vital pursuit of a total and inclusive history—one he admits is impossible to realize—reveals the plurality of human experiences. This is akin to concepts of revisionist history, representing peoples who have previously been unrepresented, but it is more focused on the stories people tell about *themselves* and their experiences as “battles against dominant narratives.” These stories, according to Lipsitz, represent counter-memories:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story.... Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience. (*Time* 213)

Lipsitz’s description of the formation and content of counter-memories may be overly specific, but he raises the crucial matter that this kind of populist cultural remembrance may be very different from and present a far more diverse and inclusive picture of the past than the “official” memories that calcify into history and often reproduce hegemonic systems of power and control. I would like to extend Lipsitz’s reworking of Foucault’s conception of counter-memory by thinking of this kind of memory work more in terms of *revisionist* than *counter-memory*. As with the academic practice of revisionist history, revisionist memory re-narrativizes the past in order to uncover or “reclaim” the voices, stories, and responses of those who have been left out of or ignored by orthodox histories, instilling old forms with new

meanings. Similarly, revisionist memory takes as a central concern the analysis of power systems that support one version or narrative about the past while suppressing many other versions, asking why this process of silencing has taken place.

The added usefulness of the concept of revisionist memory stems from its origins as a legal term used in medical litigation, in which it refers to the affective and/or psychological factors that influence memory. In its original use, the term denotes the degree to which strong emotions color remembrance, specifically the effect emotion can have on patients' reliability to accurately recall past events ("Revisionist"). Although the original connotations of revisionist memory are problematic in their implication that individuals' emotions and affective state can distort the "truth" about the past, I nonetheless find the term's emphasis on emotion and affect to be critical in theorizing the how and why of memory formation, the conditions that help or hinder the translation of personal memories into cultural memories, and the methods by which people discover or create a useable past. And because revisionist memory is often purpose-driven in how it recalls the past in order to heighten its usefulness and relevancy, I also see the concept dovetailing neatly with media consumers' acts of repurposing media texts from the past.

Acts of consumption that also include aspects of repurposing heighten the consumer's awareness that there is not merely one way to interact with and make use of mass mediated images, and that mass media texts, even from generations back, can be recontextualized and rearticulated to fit new specifications. The repurposing of star images of the past is significant not only in demonstrating some form of audience agency in the remembrance and reception of media texts, but also because this process encourages a reconsideration of the past that often complicates standard historical accounts. "Memory work brings together unusual bits of the past in unpredictable ways," Zelizer contends; the very unpredictability and contingency of what we

know about the past contributes to what she describes as “reading the past against the grain” (221). Comprehending the past in such revisionist terms fosters greater awareness of the choices, coercions, and contingencies that have brought us to our present social state—one that did not necessarily, for better or worse, *have to* become what it has.

Revisionism and repurposing also correspond to the axiom of memory studies that memory is always *in process*. The basic conception of remembrance in memory studies as a series of interventions, negotiations, and assemblages, all highly determined by context and affect, rather than as static recollections, means that memory is inevitably about changeability. Indeed, much of memory’s potential impact on social, political, or historical matters lies in this state of constant flux. Sequential modifications over time to cultural forms, even if they do not represent particularly progressive alterations in signifying potential, can nonetheless serve as a kind of semantic lubricant that helps forestall one meaning from oxidizing into place—and can therefore allow portions of that cultural memory to swing with changes in the cultural breeze. Looking at the many alterations to Bara’s image as a historical record helps indicate how audience interpretation and use of media can reflect, catalyze, critique, or inhibit new socio-political relations between people.

### **A Star for the Ages: The Polysemy of Bara’s Image**

The inevitability of change is also the gateway towards expansion of the groups and ideas represented in cultural memory, and for individual or idiosyncratic remembrances to enter cultural discourse. I have made the case that repurposing is one of the ways that media consumers may achieve this, and that scholars of media reception might gain insight into the ways audiences make use of media texts and of the past. I have also made the case that the

polysemy and “open-endedness” of Bara’s image have been the crucial factors in her long-term remembrance, precisely because these aspects of her image have made it more adaptable to new interpretations and acts of repurposing, a situation arguably helped rather than hindered by the loss of most of her films. Because of this, I would further make the case that the combined polysemy and long remembrance of Bara’s image contribute to the likeliness of that image becoming a site of alternative historical remembrances and revisionist memories.

Of course, it is not the text itself, but the reading and interpretation of the text from which new meanings and uses emerge. Nonetheless, I contend that there are multiple aspects of Bara’s image and the conditions of her remembrance that offer particular opportunities for media consumers to create something new from the old. Over the course of this dissertation, I explore in depth the reasons Bara continues to circulate in cultural memory, recur in media representations, and generate interest. But there are three conditions that I outline here that broadly explain her remembrance: memory typecasting; the continued resonance of the vamp image; and most complicatedly, the “afterlife” Bara’s image has achieved separate from the specificity of her stardom.

Bara’s resilience in cultural memory is largely due to still being typecast as the vamp. Typecasting, as this indicates, is not just a phenomenon of acting or the cinema, but also impacts the form and duration of memory. Bara’s career was cut short because audience expectations, studio demands, and the resultant casting prevented her from expanding her image beyond the one-note character type of the devious harlot—a type that fell out of moviegoers’ favor concurrent with World War I, changing gender roles, and what has been perceived as an increased sophistication about sexuality amongst the general American public. As an actress often cast as an ethnic type, Bara was also negatively affected by the post-war rise in xenophobia



masquerading as patriotism. What was disastrous for her career in the short term, though, has served Bara well in terms of posterity, for it seems unlikely that she would still be remembered without such a readily identifiable—and recurring—image.

The cross-generational recurrences of Bara's image also speak to the continued cultural resonance of the vamp image. In dramatic contrast to most of the popular leading ladies of her day, such as Mary Pickford, Clara Kimball Young, or Norma Talmadge, Bara's image was based on a combination of excess, exoticism, sex, and for some audiences, subversion—traits which have better corresponded with changes in audience interests, tastes, and concerns than have the virtuous, self-sacrificing tragediennes and non-threatening girl-next-door types of past popularity. As James Robert Parish describes Bara, "Her contribution to the cinema was to perfect an exaggerated portrayal of the emancipated female who brooked no interference with her passion for love and material riches" (17). The centrality of female independence and unrepressed sexuality in Bara's image has given her enough seeming social relevance to traverse temporal and cultural contexts. Without question, the polysemy of Bara's image in communicating ambiguous messages about female sexuality in a society highly ambivalent about that particular matter is at the heart of continuing interest in her, and sex is always at the core of the various permutations of Bara's image.

While the hyper-exaggeration of feminine wiliness, phony ethnicity, overblown sensuality, clumsy eroticism, and general oddness of Bara's vamp image have helped it survive, these factors have done so by making Bara intriguing yet problematic enough for feminist interrogation, or flamboyantly quirky enough to be ripe for parodic reinterpretations, ironic readings, and cult status. Even if Bara's remembrance has not always been complimentary to the actress (regarding her acting ability, looks, complicity in mendacious publicity stunts, etc.), or

decisive about the apparent meanings of her image (whether or not it is misogynist, racist, a corruptive influence, etc.), the very fact that the social and political implications of her image are contestable or even troublesome has helped perpetuate that remembrance.

More than this, Bara has endured because the kind of sexually devious femme fatale role in which she was typecast has remained one of the most popular, lasting, and recurrent character types in cinema—as Gaylyn Studlar writes, Bara “has achieved iconic status for almost one hundred years as one of the most recognizable of motion pictures’ inscriptions of seductive feminine evil” (“Theda” 117). Although it oversimplifies the complex image of the femme fatale and dehistoricizes what each new variant of the trope conveys about its context to imply that there is a direct continuity linking Bara to, say, Nita Naldi, Marlene Dietrich, Lana Turner, Barbara Steele, Faye Dunaway, Sharon Stone, and on to Angelina Jolie, a large part of the remembrance of Bara has to do with her perceived status as the foremother of the cinematic bad girl.

The third condition for Bara’s remembrance, the extension of her *image* as separate from her stardom, is the principal concern of this dissertation, because it is inextricably bound with the changing dynamics of how audiences have repurposed and reused that image. The degree to which audiences have found Bara useful across time and context derives from the separation between the specificity of her stardom and her star image, which in turn has played a major role in her being remembered in spite of loss or inaccessibility of her films.

As noted, Bara’s star image is capable of occupying many different and even contradictory symbolic positions simultaneously. I regard this as exemplary of how a star image can become a palimpsest—one that takes on, as in Bara’s case, more layers as it traverses time and place. Describing how “viewer desire and representational strategies” converge in a

“contagious, spiraling, multimedia” palimpsest, Jennifer Bean sees the resulting reception “in terms that implode normative regimes of signification, adamantly defying the logic of linearity and expediency, aggressively rerouting, protracting, and intensifying a kind of affect and ensuing effects” (3). Far from making the star-as-text unintelligible, the palimpsestic nature of an image like Bara’s extends its meaning-making potentialities, widening the pool of individuals who may find something of interest or use in the image, and thus enhancing the chance for that star to be remembered. Media consumers are increasingly not just able, but inclined, to read popular culture as a palimpsest, with traces of both forerunners and successors, along with other extra-textual referents, not just visible but sought out. Terms like “convergence culture” and “remediation” describe the lively conditions facilitated by new media that keep old and new media texts both in a state of interplay and inter-exchange: within our “media-saturated culture,” Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write, “we see film through other media and other media through film in a play of mutual remediations” (82).

The apprehension of the multiple layers of meaning brought about by this kind of interaction with media can complicate a star image in such a way that it continues to seem culturally relevant long beyond its context of origin. With Bara, for example, the visible layers of both feminist and anti-feminist discourse captured within her image can function as a microcosmic history of issues confronted in the quest for gender equality. In theory, the palimpsestic quality of a star’s image may also help the reader of the star-as-text to get a sense of the stratifying dynamics that bury some layers of meaning while pushing others to the fore, an indicator of changing beliefs and concerns over time and across space, and the socio-political forces that drive such changes. In short, it becomes a means to charting revisionist memory.

With the ever-increasing access to media from a range of places and times, I contend individuals creatively consuming, repurposing, and reading multiple meanings in media of the past *in particular* are gaining heightened awareness of their capacity to shape and contribute to cultural memory. Many of the examples of Bara's repurposed image I explore make no attempt to erase earlier interpretations that contradict or conflict with the new interpretations, instead preserving them as points of comparison. Doing so not only retains the historicity of interpretations, but aids in questioning earlier positions and attitudes now regarded as retrograde and oppressive. For instance, virtually all rearticulations of Bara's image retain allusions to disruptively excessive sexuality and self-gratification—the central characteristics of her star image—but also to foreignness, brazenness, nonconformity, and other characteristics understood as threats to convention and “normality” that have been held over from her original publicity. Although Bara's erotic-exotic image can be, and has been, used as a warning to keep women in “their place,” my study looks more closely at reinterpretations and reuses signaling changing values and attitudes about gender, sexuality, ethnic difference, cultural marginalization, and social transgression. And in many cases, the impact of these reinterpretations and reuses hinges upon their contrast to earlier versions of the Bara image, such as those now regarded as stridently sexist and racist.

Just as the star-as-palimpsest metaphor represents the possibility for an image to support a wide range of differing interpretations and meanings, so too does the highly intertextual nature of a star image—a consideration of even greater consequence for a star whose films for the most part no longer exist. In wresting maximum use value from extant fragments of both information and artifacts, the study of Bara's cultural and historical significance can serve as a model for how we might discover something about the thousands of other lost films and their forgotten or

precariously remembered stars, directors, writers, and technicians. This requires looking at film not only as a physical object (the primary concern of film preservationists and archivists) or as a time-based sensory experience (the primary concern of most audiences, critics, theorists, and historians), but as a discursive construct comprised of multiple factors, tangible and intangible, in ever-changing and entirely contingent combinations.

This concept of film is not new. Burgin, for instance, describes film as a heterogeneous, multifarious “object” encountered in many ways other than the experience of watching a film. He contends that we make sense of seemingly incoherent fragments of lived experience, media, and memory through thought processes that differ from conscious, rational thinking, and that our relation to the media environment is analogous to the unconscious weaving together of disparate elements into a dream (14). We come to an understanding of experiences through a mental bricolage of displaced fragments, which likely include images from film (10). Burgin sees this relation to the media environment as a means of instilling us with a cache of images and affective reactions in which exposure to media forms and lived experience may blur and cohere in memory. Tangible artifacts such as advertisements, reviews, stills, and memorabilia become mnemonic devices recalling a star or a film. Of particular significance to my project, Burgin states that by “collecting such metonymic fragments in memory, we may come to feel familiar with a film we have not actually seen” (9).

Study of film in this sense requires engaging with the larger intertextual network encompassing a particular film, including the “ephemera” or “surround” contributing to or generated by a film text—screenplays, set designs, costumes, storyboards, continuity stills, advertising and promotion, tie-in commercial products, reviews and criticism, gossip, etc. Theorizing the “transtextual relationships” that enlarge a given text’s capacity to generate

meaning, literary theorist Gérard Genette devised several terms to describe various modes of textual expansion via both intra- and intertextual influence.<sup>19</sup> The *paratext*, for instance, is the set of “secondary signals” which append a text and influence how it is read; in film, this would include elements such as title and credit sequences, trailers, and advertising. *Metatextuality* refers to commentary that “unites a given text to another” (1997a, 4), while *architextuality*, being a “purely taxonomic” matter, concerns perceptions of genre. While all of these have application to the remembrance and reuse of Bara’s image, the most pertinent of Genette’s concepts here is *hypertextuality*, which like the more familiar use of the term in computing, refers to the linking of texts in a way that precipitates a jump from one to the other.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, besides being a palimpsest, with vertical strata of signifiers, Bara is also a generative hypertextual relay within the horizontal spread of the intertext, linked with an extensive range of subsequent texts that adapt and expand her image and meaning.

As she herself has faded in prominence and other texts reworking her image have ascended, Bara is remembered primarily through these hypertextual connections, thereby keeping her memory “alive” through its recall and replication in a wide-ranging intertextual network. Examining how media platform crossovers affect the construction of teenage television stars’ “intertextual personae,” Susan Murray makes the case that the multitude of extratextual materials made available by various technologies encourages fans to “focus on the star as a text unto itself; a text that moves across media, acquiring deeper and often contradictory facets as it extends itself through numerous characterizations” (50). Bara’s multifaceted persona demonstrates that such readings of star images are not new, but Murray’s contention that “the generation reared on transmedia intertextuality” (48) is more attuned to synthesize meanings from scattered bits of data suggests that individuals interested in Bara may be interpreting the

intertextual nature of her image in even more varied ways, with even more unanticipated applications.

Thus, rather than being regarded only as secondary, trivial, or “better than nothing,” the intertextual surround and extant ephemera filling the gaps left by the loss of films need to be examined, as Genette’s work indicates, for meaning-making potential that includes but *exceeds* knowledge of a lost film’s form and content. In large part my dissertation looks at how artifacts, remembrances, and repurposings can be engaged, not as substitutes or “stand ins” for the lost film and its star, but as raw materials in creating meanings that emerge from, expand on, but are not constrained by the film-as-experience. Lost or fragmented film, then, may be conceived of as “the ideal postmodern artifact,” according to Darragh O’Donoghue, because of their “subversion of authorial intention and...decentring of narrative, formal, thematic and stylistic totality.... Closure is denied, loose ends float free, the unities are blasted open.” In spite of the “tragic loss of an original vision,” lost and fragmentary films (and I would argue, their attendant ephemera) nonetheless “liberate” a viewer, O’Donoghue argues, by activating “his or her imagination, to take what remains, and, unbounded by human or historical probability, send it in directions the filmmaker may never have intended.” Put another way, the fragmentation of the original film text results in the creation of new extra-textual unities through media consumers’ encounters with the work’s intertext.

Perhaps even more than cinematic fragments, stars, including those of now lost or forgotten films, activate imaginations in unexpected ways. Star image, like film, is a discursive construction that is highly contingent. As Hills contends, figures that have attained a cult or iconic status, such as Bara, “combine endlessly deferred narrative with qualities of ‘denarration’” (*Fan* 131). This further supports my contention that the unavailability of so many of her films

has actually expanded the polysemic potentials of Bara's image, unmoored as it has become from the specificity of filmic narratives, and contributing all the more to the endlessly deferred meaning of her image. Further, the loss of her films has required the supplementary intertextual elements to take on an expanded duty of signification. Instances of open-endedness or deferral of closure in cultural texts require the reader to "fill in the gaps" and invite active production of meaning, a circumstance that John Fiske argues put the reader in a "position of power." Open texts of this sort, Fiske contends, "are the raw materials out of which a number of narratives can be produced" (*Reading* 121).

Looking specifically at stars, and using female audiences' responses to Rudolph Valentino as a case study, Hansen also contends that a certain excess of meaning heightens a star's polysemy and adaptability as a cultural signifier. In theorizing the ideological functions of stardom, Hansen asserts that by exceeding narrative function, the star phenomenon "complicates the psychological-semiological preoccupation" with the illusion of reality played out onscreen. This is because the star's image is both constructed and experienced in multiple ways *outside* the film-viewing situation, which "blurs the boundary between diegesis and discourse." The cultural pervasion of publicity and gossip surrounding a star, in other words, makes one over-aware of her being an actress, precluding total acceptance of her as any other character: in any film role, Theda Bara always stayed Theda Bara playing a part. As such, the spectator brings to a screening a passel of extra-filmic knowledge about the star that interrupts identification with an onscreen character and suture to the narrative (246).

Because of this, Hansen sees the star's persona as holding a "certain amount of real unpredictability and instability," therefore becoming a source of "potentially alternative formations" of meaning within the "industrial-commercial public sphere" in which the star image



circulates (248). If extra-filmic knowledge of stars' personae, gleaned through exposure to the intertext surrounding stars and brought by audiences to the film experience, shifts focus away from film narrative, then it follows that if a star image and its attendant discourse can be independent of a specific film, star images can have meanings entirely distinct from onscreen performances. Further, as McDonald writes, audiences "also bring many different social and cultural competencies to their understanding of a star's identity, so that the image will be interpreted in many different ways." Because of this, McDonald argues, the meaning of a star's image is not to be found within the film or any other media platform, but only in the "interaction between moviegoers and star texts" (*Star System* 7). As with all stars, Bara thus initiates a "freeplay" of signification, opening her star image to multiple interpretations and uses, which in turn contribute to that image's adaptability to changing contexts, while also extending the remembrance of her.

Although these observations may imply that I am connecting the importance of audience remembrance and use of Bara's image with the political consequences these acts may have, I want to get beyond the idea that stars' images are only useful in some tangible, direct, measurable way that takes on a "life" external to the individual mind. Mayne describes the problems of this limited form of analysis:

The homilies of resistant-versus-complicit readings that have been so central to film studies in general, and spectatorship studies in particular, are bound by historical and cultural limitations of the notions of "agency, creativity, and autonomy." The persistent duality of being inside dominant ideology, and complicit, versus being outside it and therefore resistant, reduces politics to a question of reading, and the complexities of spectatorship to facile and static opposition. (138)

While it is true that nothing is ever separate from politics, and even our most private emotional and affective states are shaped within ideology, choosing not to dismiss as inconsequential the affective responses by which media consumers typically express their tastes and attachments is one way of expanding the analytical scope. The polysemic nature of star images, even if “structured” or negotiated, not only allows the media consumer to repurpose mass mediated texts to fit her or his specifications, but also allows the media *scholar* room to think about the larger cultural and social meanings of media images, reception, and memory beyond a focus on their political consequences and media consumers’ speculative capacity to resist or transgress.

The affective response or emotional connection evoked by a media text, and that text’s effect on an individual’s psychic state and sense of self is culturally important, even though it may never take on an exterior form that is visible, measurable, or recognizable to others. We remember things from our experiences that are not deemed historically “important” enough to be recorded officially, but may be vital to our sense of identity and well-being. While there is no doubt that multiple versions exist of history, memory tends to be idiosyncratic to the point of uniqueness. The personal meaning and significance a popular culture text carries for an individual may not be something she or he is able to articulate, or of which he or she is not even fully cognizant. In a similar sense, memories need not circulate at the cultural level, let alone be counter or revisionist, to have deep significance and motivational influence on an individual, or resonance that extends outside the individual consciousness.

For most media consumers, then, their remembrance, use, and reuse of a star image is not typically, or at least conscientiously, about the potential for progressive or liberatory political ends, or what it communicates about social patterns and historical occurrences, or even active

pursuit of identity construction. Rather, remembrance and use are primarily determined by that which evokes pleasurable or meaningful affective responses—what the subject likes, without necessarily being able to say why. And yet, even such acts of cathexis (investing objects with emotional significance) may remain concealed at the most personal level, escaping expression in language or exterior behavior, deeply embedded in contexts of politics, economics, social justice, psychology, and the vicissitudes of history and memory.

This complex interconnection of media consumption, consumer affect, memory, and history is explored more fully in the following chapters. The case studies I use for this inquiry are organized in a roughly chronological order. The first two chapters are concerned with reevaluating the historical record, examining the factors that open the possibility for it to become an *alternative* historical record. The two subsequent chapters are more involved with reception at the present moment, looking at how individual acts of repurposing star image become contributions to cultural memory.

Chapter One is framed by the theoretical argument, proposed by Dyer and others, that star images may be particularly useful to marginalized groups in terms of claiming representation and empowerment from the mass media. I explore this matter with a historical reception study of 1910s audiences, comparing and contrasting the responses of immigrant women, a group perceived as marginal, and American-born men, a group perceived as dominant. These case studies demonstrate not only how disempowered groups might work with commercial culture to arrive at counter-meanings, but also challenges assumptions about “preferred” or dominant readings by complicating the idea that male audiences only regarded Bara as a sex symbol. In these terms, the chapter is a case study in what historical evidence may tell us about the reasons

cultural memories have been rethought and reshaped in particular ways and in particular contexts.

Chapter Two also explores the issue of expansion of meanings and potential uses of Bara's image, framing the discussion with a theoretical examination of the textual effects of parody. By examining three specific instances of Bara being parodied, in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1970s, I chart the ways in which the particulars of these parodies serve as historical records of socio-cultural changes in attitude towards sex and women's roles. I make the case that each act of parody further expanded the polysemic potential of Bara's image, not only breaking new ground for subsequent parodies, but for more personalized meanings and opportunities that facilitated media consumers' repurposing of her image for new uses. I conclude the chapter with three later examples of Bara being parodied, from the 1990s and 2000s, to look at specific ways her image has been adapted in revisionist memory to create an alternative historical record and further expand the meanings and uses of her image.

Chapter Three presents a more focused case study in how revisionist remembrance of Bara has supported acts of repurposing by subcultural groups, examining how the connections between Bara, the horror genre, and female punk and alternative rock stars of the 1970s and 1980s have made her an iconic figure in the goth subculture. Interviews with current day Bara fans give insight into cathexis as a component of self-definition, and into the role affect and emotion play in preserving cultural heritage and spurring revisionist memory. Many of my informants based their interest in and affective response to Bara not solely on her vamp image, but on expressed empathetic feelings for Theodosia Goodman, the reserved, home loving, bookish "nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati" behind the Bara façade, whose life as a celebrity was astonishing in its complete lack of private scandal. Several informants also demonstrate how

third-wave feminist “reclamations” of Bara through repurposing make potentially liberating or even subversive use of the very aspects of Bara’s image that generated moral panic in the 1910s but are perceived now as matters connected to social justice and equity.

Chapter Four also uses empirical audience studies to look more closely at grassroots efforts in preservation, archiving, and curatorship of cultural heritage. Digital media has greatly expanded not only the access media consumers have to images and information about Bara, but also the degree to which they become producers of meanings through redaction and recontextualization. This chapter looks at several instances of such producers, both amateur and professional. These producers create new works that serve as far more than mere “stand ins” for Bara’s lost films, and instead constitute a new archive that simultaneously recirculates Bara through cultural discourse and enlarges the parameters of the use and meaning of her image by re-presenting it through personal interpretations. Recognizing the potential for Bara’s image to lose meaning by being overloaded with *too much* meaning in the no-holds-barred environment of the Internet, and for erroneous or purposefully “spun” information to gain cultural ascendancy, I make a case in this chapter for greater collaboration between professional and amateur archivists and preservationists.

Although I contend that aspects of Bara’s image and the disconnect of that image from actual films, narratives, and characters represent something distinct in terms of reception, every star image is equally rich in polysemy and potential, affording audiences its own panoply of meanings and uses. With stars’ capacity to impact personal and social identities, the parameters of social interaction, and political agency, this is therefore an exploration that takes us beyond the meaning and function of a single star to larger questions of how and why stars matter. My particular study examines the interconnection of reception and cultural memory to seek answers.

As we have seen, memory, both that which seems personal and that which allies us with one or more social groups, can be shaped—and in some cases may be primarily shaped—by factors other than lived experience, including media consumption. Because patterns of consumption and the politicization of taste in the so-called culture wars can be among the most potent forces shaping memory, it is vital to take even seemingly “inconsequential” popular cultural texts and their consumption seriously in thinking about how past, present, and future cultural conditions interrelate. In fulfilling the need for “a new understanding of the past as well as the present,” Lipsitz observes, “developments which might strike us as fundamentally new and unexpected also have a long history of their own.” He encourages reconsideration of the past “in which better knowledge about suppressed elements of the past might make us better prepared for the present and the future” (*American* 34).

As I’ve argued, study of the reception of popular culture may be among the most productive, and in some cases *only*, means of discovering how peoples of the past under- or unrepresented in standard historical accounts extracted meaning from and reacted to the dominant culture around them. Since the distinctions between cultural memory and history are not often clear, it is especially important to investigate the connections between the socio-political ramifications of star images, the affective attachments different audiences develop for different stars, and the systems that determine which voices speak and are heard in cultural discourse. In the following pages, this is precisely my goal.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997): 400.

<sup>2</sup> The greatest blow to Bara's filmic record, along with most of Fox Film Corporation's other silent film productions, took place on July 9, 1937 when a storage facility rented by the studio in Little Ferry, New Jersey caught fire. Anthony Slide refers to the Little Ferry conflagration as "the most tragic of all American nitrate film fires in terms of both loss of life and loss of America's film heritage"; in all forty-two storage vaults were destroyed (*Nitrate*, 13).

<sup>3</sup> As of 2014, the Bara films known to survive in a complete or near complete state are the features *A Fool There Was* (Powell, 1915); *East Lynne* (Bracken, 1916); *The Unchastened Woman* (Young, 1925); and the short *Madame Mystery* (Wallace and Laurel, 1926). Bara reportedly also appears as an uncredited extra in another extant film, *The Stain* (Powell, 1914), although there is ongoing debate as to which character—intriguingly, either a nun or a gun moll—she actually plays. Filmographies of the star also sometimes include the extant comedy short *45 Minutes from Hollywood* (Guiol, 1926). Bara's appearance in that film, however, is limited to a few seconds' worth of outtakes from *Madame Mystery*, which had been produced by the same company, Hal Roach Studios.

<sup>4</sup> The AFI's list has become rather controversial, not so much because of the choice of "most wanted" films, but because of the AFI's habit of creating highly subjective lists of films touted as the most important or "the best," and by implication, the only ones the public need pay attention to. Paolo Cherchi Usai has obliquely condemned the AFI's propensity for compiling lists as an "immoral and nefarious exercise" by writing that organizations who *should be* concerned with film preservation are in fact creating overly narrow canons that unduly influence audience tastes and expectations—and therefore drive determination of what gets preserved to a handful of populist choices (*Silent Cinema*, 69).

<sup>5</sup> Considering her tremendous popularity between 1915 and the end of the First World War, and the consequently high number of prints that had been in circulation (forty for each of her first eleven films, according to the *New York Times* report "Some 500,000 Spectators Follow Her Every Day" of Feb 20, 1916, p. X8), the almost complete loss of Bara's film record is all the more surprising.

<sup>6</sup> Although Bara is often identified as the first cinematic vamp, actress Helen Gardner or dancer Alice Eis, performing as the titular character in *The Vampire* (Vignola, 1913), amongst other contenders, precede Bara's wicked woman.

<sup>7</sup> Several works address the psychological, social, and political implications of the vamp/femme fatale archetype. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996); Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Thank you to Kasia Chmielewska for her insightful assessment that the use of Bara's image resembles a method for evaluating meaning.

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<sup>9</sup> Although many scholars of media audiences, including Janet Staiger and Matt Hills, legitimately raise issues with an ethnographic approach, maintaining that data gleaned directly from media consumers is too often presumed to be an inviolable “truth” about reception, I take this criticism more as a caution than as a deterrent. While media consumers’ own words may indeed be an exaggerated, misrepresented, or otherwise “spun” account of their interaction with the media, I still find significant value in accessing the voices, ideas, and expressions of individuals, particularly in attempting to assess the role affect plays in taste, identity, and memory.

<sup>10</sup> My use of the concept of repurposing differs from that of other media scholars, such as Barbara Klinger, who uses the term to connote “the media industry’s attempt to gain as much revenue as possible from a given property” through practices such as repackaging older product for resale, as with DVDs, or through tie-ins that link media product to other consumer products (*Beyond* 8). Instead, I focus on acts of repurposing by media *consumers* rather than the media industry.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, in fact, includes the vamp in a list of mass media character types that he argues reinforce the dominant order (as opposed to the fine arts, which he claims offer characters *disruptive* to the dominant order). Character types in mass media, Marcuse insists, “are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order” (qtd. Dyer, *Stars* 13).

<sup>12</sup> A *Motion Picture Magazine* poll from December 1918, for instance, indicates that now largely forgotten stars like Marguerite Clark and Harold Lockwood beat out far better remembered stars such as Bara, William S. Hart, and Pearl White in terms of popularity (Koszarski 261).

<sup>13</sup> Some poststructuralist critics regard the idea of collective memory as a “dubious phenomenon,” writes Daniel Nathan, since the concept of collectivity suggests “implied consensus” amongst varied groups demanding a “coherency and unity that most societies lack” (60).

<sup>14</sup> Unpacking the complexity and controversy of where collective memory ends and history begins would lead me too far astray from the more specific goals of my study. Barbie Zelizer remarks on the “fluidity to the distinction between history and memory,” and notes that “less traditional historians” have considered the relationship between history and collective memory as “complementary, identical, oppositional, or antithetical at different times” (216).

<sup>15</sup> Although I find the concept of cultural memory more germane to my work, not all memory studies scholars use this term. Therefore, in this introductory literature review, I will sometimes also use the term “collective memory,” depending on which term the cited authors have used in their studies.

<sup>16</sup> While Marcus presents this idea in connection with the Marxist practices of the Situationist International and its deconstruction of popular cultural texts to ideological ends, media and cultural studies have clearly shown that this practice is much more commonplace in media audiences, and hardly exclusive to intellectuals or the politically-motivated. That said, as many media scholars have pointed out (Jenkins, 1992; Staiger, 1992; Hills, 2002), individual interpretations of media texts are not necessarily, or even probably, resistant, progressive, or subversive.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the origins of “Theda Bara” as a stage name, see Chapter One, endnote 11.

<sup>18</sup> Dyer introduced the term “structured polysemy” in his book *Stars*. Although he does not use the term, *per se*, in his later book *Heavenly Bodies*, from which this citation is taken, this passage very clearly describes the effects Dyer argued that structured polysemy has on reception in his earlier work.



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<sup>19</sup> Genette's use of the term *intertextuality* is somewhat idiosyncratic; for him, it denotes the actual presence of one text in another, as in quoting, allusion, or plagiarism. My use of the term throughout this dissertation, however, is based on the more standard denotation of a broader range of relationships between texts, including connections that may be less palpable or perceptible.

<sup>20</sup> For Genette, this linkage is a matter of a text deriving from an earlier one, either in imitation of the preceding text, as in pastiche and caricature, or transformation of it, as in parody, satire, and travesty.

## Chapter One

### **Immigrants, Americans, and the Vamp: 1910s Audience Reception as an Alternative Historical Record**

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*When a century or so in the future the history of the motion picture is written again  
1915 will loom back in the distant perspective as the year of Theda Bara.*

— Terry Ramsaye<sup>1</sup>

Theda Bara's image as an exotic, vaguely foreign vamp, barely human in her cruelty and irresistible allure, was conveyed to her original audiences predominantly through her film roles, in which she was typecast as "the screen embodiment of seductive feminine evil" (Studlar, "Theda" 113) and "the ultimate whore."<sup>2</sup> The filmic narratives through which her persona was constructed tended to revolve around sexual enticement, revenge schemes, and the amoral behavior of a modern "New Woman" who smokes, drinks, lives independently, lures men away from home and family, and presents herself as a sexual spectacle. All told, Bara, in the words of Gaylyn Studlar, "undermined gender and sexual norms" ("Theda" 113). Considering all this, it is little surprise that Bara was a controversial figure in the 1910s, subject to invectives from the pious and objections from affronted state censorship boards.

What *is* surprising, however, particularly in light of the loss of most of her cinematic record, is the fact that Bara continues to carry a degree of controversy as she circulates in cultural memory. The controversy stems not from moral panic over the vamp and her wiles, but as to what meanings and uses the vamp image is able to legitimately support. Bram Dijkstra, for instance, quite vociferously negates an idea central to the argument of this dissertation in rejecting the possibility that Bara's image can be "reclaimed" and repurposed by media consumers in such a way that its negative, oppressive aspects can be undone and possibly even

put to a kind of counter-use. Dijkstra, instead, argues, “[E]very time Theda Bara’s Vampire kiss made her audiences shiver, the continuing social misery and personal suffering of generations of women to come was made more inevitable. The good woman or the bad, the virgin or the vampire—submission or a stake through the heart—those were to be the choices for twentieth-century women” (46).

In this chapter, I look to evidence from the 1910s in support of my argument that reception and use of popular culture are far more complicated and open-ended than the line of thinking articulated by Dijkstra. While the central focus of this dissertation is analysis of the polysemic aspects of the Bara image, and the ways this polysemy has enabled the repurposing of that image over time, a diachronic analysis is in no way intended to suggest that multiple readings and uses of Bara’s image were not present from its first appearance. The binaric division of women into either submissive, chaste, and good or unruly, sexual, and bad that Dijkstra writes of is certainly a familiar conception of the kind of falsely delimited choices with which non-dominant groups are often confronted, but as I seek to prove in this chapter, these binaries do not represent *all* options that audiences of Bara’s films may have found or even created for themselves.

By looking back to the original context of Bara’s stardom and the initial consumers of her star image, I mean to demonstrate how different audiences, observed through their gender and ethnic identities, appear to have engaged in multi-level readings, influenced by context, ideology, and individual circumstances. When we consider such distinctions as class, ethnicity, gender, and region in 1910s audiences, we become better able to perceive Bara’s star persona as a palimpsest rife with polysemic potentialities from its moment of origin. In this way, audiences of the past

appear not only more diverse, but also more inventive in the connections they made between the media and their own particular set of circumstances, concerns, tastes, and values.

As such, this exploration not only sets up the conditions for Bara's cultural remembrance, but also yields evidence of the kind of "active," alternative readings, uses, and memories of mass culture that have been widely theorized as practiced by current-day media consumers of a postmodern sensibility, but far less examined as they occurred in the past. Discovery of evidence that helps us to expand the ways we think about the past and the people who preceded us also provides us with materials that open up a star image's capacity to repurposed, and in ways relevant to the present and consequential for the future. This kind of analysis is at the crux of the central argument of this chapter: histories, memories, and interpretations of the past that refuse to homogenize a populace, that grant "ordinary people" of the past the same capacity that we see in ourselves to interpret and respond to their culture in varying ways, and that complicate prevailing notions of what constituted the dominant discourse within a specific time and place, expand our access to a useable past. Further, exploring the past to uncover evidence of the diverse and unexpected responses that have been overshadowed by dominant discourse has positive ramifications for how we see ourselves and others, and on the potential for change in our own time and place.

My case studies for this chapter focus primarily on two broad groups of audiences. First, I look at women's experiences of immigration, first-generation status, and racial or ethnic marginalization to explore how consumption of Bara's image may have informed processes of accepting or resisting assimilation. While fully aware that simply sharing a similar social position does *not* produce a homogenous way of thinking, I look at artifacts from the 1910s that give some indication of possible patterns of reception by immigrant women, and also at how this

group was represented to “mainstream” audiences by the media. My second case study seeks not to locate commonalities, but rather the unexpected discrepancies amongst white, American, middle-class men, a demographic often left unexplored with the presumption that this group’s position in the social hierarchy *does* homogenize thinking and behavior. Complicating our notions of what comprises a “dominant” perspective by looking more closely at variants and dichotomies within that dominant group leads to a more complex vision of socio-political contexts, possibly revealing chinks in the armor of hegemonic controls. Moreover, examination of the range of readings in *both* dominant and marginal groups leads to new, unanticipated ideas about the uses that can be made of mass culture.

Remembrance of Bara’s image and its historical audiences is, like all memory, revisionist in that it is reshaped and recontextualized, again and again, by emotion and affect. Thus, when we read Bara’s image as a palimpsest, very often layers of oral history, critical opinion, fan commentary, and the influence of intertextual materials obscure historical “truths.” While this can make separation of fact from fabrication highly troublesome, it is my contention that “extra-factual” responses to and uses of film stars can give a certain kind of insight into the peoples of the past—insight that gets past emotive, nostalgic tunnel vision of a “simpler time” or sweeping generalizations that the oppressive, unenlightened dominant beliefs and behaviors in the past quashed any oppositional, progressive expressions. The conditions for the remembrance of stars who have retained a presence in cultural memory can serve as a cultural barometer, providing new insights when looked at from different perspectives, including that of audiences who may have been marginalized or ignored previously. Conversely, stars whose presence and popular appeal have faded from memory also may be particularly telling not only for their utility in contextualizing the past, but for what their *forgotten-ness* may indicate about socio-historical

changes. Remembered by some but forgotten by most, Bara can thus function as a dual-indicator of the intersection of media and memory.

In looking for historical evidence—what Keith Jenkins refers to as the “cracks” in the dominant discourse in which “new histories can be made” (79)—in support of my claim, I am in agreement with Dijkstra on one important point: the tendency to dismiss Theda Bara in film history as “merely an odd, rather negligible phenomenon of the silent screen’s infant years” is “dramatically indicative of the code of silence our culture tends to impose on those of its historical productions that have become too blatantly indicative of the sources of our contemporary mores” (46). In standard film histories, Bara often has been represented as little more than the first publicity-made film star, a crass and glaringly obvious instance of the purely economic interests behind every decision made in Hollywood, concocted by the studio system at the expense of women, ethnic minorities, and the actress herself. Historian Sean Dennis Cashman’s assertion that Bara’s “crude version of eroticism” was “lapped up by a credulous public” (343) is a typically cavalier interpretation of both the star and her audiences. It is also symptomatic of a disinclination to complicate assumptions of what Bara—or other popular cultural phenomena of the past—may have represented. As such, the interpretation of Bara as an absurd, overblown embodiment of late Victorian fears about the “otherness” of women and non-Anglo-Nordic ethnicities remains largely unquestioned, and therefore, as Dijkstra contends, leaves present-day manifestations of related forms of “othering” and marginalization also unquestioned.

While certainly there *is* validity in interpretations of Bara as an instrument of hegemonic control over women and ethnic minorities, any recognition of heterogeneity in historical audiences fundamentally complicates such a reading. The fact that Bara was one of the most

popular film stars of the twentieth century can only rightfully be regarded as a multi-tiered site of study, and it is too simplistic to merely dismiss Bara's star image as sexist or racist without examining the many interpretations and uses that her image might have generated, *especially* by those groups believed to have been negatively impacted by that image. Unquestionably, social, political, cultural, economic, and historical changes between 1915 and the present have had enormous impact on the horizons of expectations which affect how Bara's image is read, and we may indeed regard Bara in a *very* different way than viewers of the 1910s. Even so, reassessing the one-note, prescribed way it has been *assumed* Bara's image was received becomes both an invitation and a caveat in rethinking our perception of those citizens of the foreign country that is the past.

### **Cracks in the Discourse: Reassessing the Past**

Referencing a shift in the early film industry around 1910 in which the names of a production's lead actors, rather than the studio's name, were becoming the focal point of advertising and promotion, Eileen Bowser writes, "The era of star exploitation was only just beginning: Theda Bara had not yet been invented" (119). This signals the contention that Bara marked something new, and something extreme, in the industry's efforts to attract audiences. Contradiction, ambiguity, and excess were major factors in the publicity strategies used to promote Bara. This is a fairly common tactic in generating interest in stars, but was particularly pronounced in Bara's promotion. She was presented to audiences as both "bad" and "good," immoral and upright, exotic and ordinary, esoteric and pragmatic, and of a rotating range of ethnic types, in publicity pieces that could either seem serious or sarcastic, teasing readers with a purposeful confusion of truth and fantasy (Figure 1.1; Figure 1.2).



**Figure 1.1, Figure 1.2:** Visual examples of Bara's dichotomous image

This ambiguity theoretically makes her image more open to a diverse range of interpretations. Determining what effects interpretations of all this excess and contradiction might have had on social conditions, however, is a difficult matter, particularly when doing historical research on people connected with one or more marginalized groups. Although I believe a reception studies approach to audience interaction with the media is a particularly effective method of reframing unchallenged conventions of history, the slipperiness of historical truth, the inevitable subjectivity and volatility of memory, and the dearth of hard evidence occludes what we can conclusively *know* about the past and its denizens.



With Bara, the difficulty is compounded by the loss of her films, for as Studlar points out, the inability to see those films means “there is much regarding her appeal to audiences, her performance style, and her stardom that we will never know” (“Theda” 116). Other primary source materials, if they ever existed at all, that might convey the first-hand impressions and affective responses of individuals within groups such as immigrant women are only encountered by chance, meaning that other, more equivocal methods of exploring the past must be employed. Noting the demands of trying to conceive of the reactions of historical audiences through research, Janet Staiger acknowledges the difficulty of locating evidence of nondominant or resistant readings, and that “many questions may be impossible to answer, even with considerable extrapolation from available information” (*Interpreting* 87).

Extracting data from mass-mediated artifacts suggestive of how cultural memory was constructed in the past and maintained or altered over time, by whom, and for what possible reasons, may not be the same as “knowing” the past, but done with recognition of the *range* of conceivable interpretations by historical audiences, and the contextual influences on that range, broadens how we might see and think about that data as a historical record. Attention to such “Interpretations-in-history,” Staiger emphasizes, can lay bare the socio-political consequences of audience responses as “they relate to historical social struggles” (*Interpreting* 18). In this way, a reception studies approach might offer a way past what Gene Wise has called “climate-of-opinion” history—the “convenient to write” historiography that assigns a list of general characteristics to a period, explaining any particular idea by “plugging it into” one of these generalized categories. The result, according to Wise, is a history that is not only one-dimensional, but also monolithic, presuming a “holistic culture more thoroughly integrated, and

more rigidly hierarchical, than experience of our own fragmented culture suggests to us today” (168-9).

Engaging with the interchange between reception and memory is a means to rethinking history. Jenkins describes a “desirable approach to history” as one in which history is not regarded as “a subject discipline aiming at a real knowledge of the past,” but is seen instead as “a discursive practice that enables present-minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs” (80-1). At the same time, Jenkins emphasizes the necessity of a reflexive approach to historiography and awareness of how our own historicity within a context influences the ways we think about and respond to the past. This awareness allows us to recognize the “utter contingency” of how the past is and *has been* interpreted, and grasp that the presiding narratives about the past are not necessarily “true,” but are “at the ‘centre’ of our culture” because they are “aligned to the dominant discursive practices,” linking the control of knowledge to power. The resultant “interpretive flux” can be, he argues, “potentially empowering to even the most marginal,” by offering oppressed groups the means to “make their own histories even if they do not have the power to make them other peoples” (79).

Jenkins attributes the previously mentioned cracks in the dominant discourse in which new histories can be made to “destabilization and fracturing” brought about by the postmodern condition, in which “absent centres and collapsed metanarratives” have resulted in a “multiplicity of histories that can be met everywhere throughout our democratic/consumerising culture, a mass of genres (designer/niched histories) to be variously used and/or abused” (78). Paraphrasing Tony Bennett, Jenkins contends that the “radical cogency” enabled by this rethinking of history “can make visible aspects of the past that have previously been hidden or secreted away; that have previously been overlooked or sidelined, thereby producing fresh

insights that can actually make emancipatory, material differences to and within the present—which is where all history starts from and returns to” (80-1). This is the kind of historical intervention I see my study of Bara performing.

Throughout this analysis, I encourage the reader to keep in mind two additional thoughts about how we make sense of the past. The first is the historical method of Michel Foucault, whose intent in exploring the past was to introduce an “ethic of discomfort” that would call into question “our relation to the present and to ourselves in the present” (Rabinow and Rose xxviii). As Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose explain, Foucault promoted a “reframing” of standard perceptions of various issues of importance and relationships of power in such a way that, while the components of the analysis remain recognizably the same, the configurations change: “New relations, dangers, promises, apparatuses, stakes, and quandaries come into view and we can see how our present took shape through successive attempts to resolve them” (xi). Reframing the standard perceptions of Bara as an oppressive, commercialized stereotype of women and foreigners opens the way to discover new relations between audiences and the media, and between the past and the present.

The second thought to bear in mind is the idea that history is neither monolithic nor fixed, but formulated from a “vast web of subjective texts” open to recombinant permutations and reinterpretations of cause, effect, meaning, and significance. Paraphrasing the work of Linda Hutcheon, Graham Allen writes that the past is only ever “available” to historians “through a network of prior texts, all infused with the traces of prior authors with their own ideological agendas, presuppositions and prejudices.” Because of this, each new historical account is always “one more author’s struggle to negotiate a way through an intertextual network of previous forms and representations” (Allen, G. 191-2).

In regarding history as an intertextual and contingent construct, I would also point out that what we think we know about the past is likely as much a confluence of received wisdom, imagination, the media, and memory in all its imperfections, as it is formal education or direct experience. Further, each of these conduits carries many opportunities for the subjective to be reified as objective, and plurality to be assimilated into one homogenized, standardized account. In his study of the 1919 Black Sox scandal, Daniel Nathan, like Allen, uses the word “struggle” to refer to ways of knowing the “truth” and the cultural meaning of the past, saying that factuality is less important in his analysis than examining the construction of historical narratives, “which inevitably reshapes, omits, distorts, conflates, and reorganizes the past” (7). With this in mind, Nathan writes that the various narratives about the Black Sox scandal cannot be separated from the specific social and cultural circumstances in which they were formulated; thus, the narratives actually reveal more about those who constructed them and their intended audiences than anything about the historical events themselves (9).

Marita Sturken, too, expands conceptions of what constitutes evidence about life in the past, and what exactly we are able to learn from this evidence, saying, “We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present” (2). This is important to keep in mind, not just because scarcity of primary source materials necessitates enlarging our notions of what can serve as evidence and how it can work, but also precisely because there is so much purposeful confusion of fact and fiction in of Fox’s promotion of Bara. Because so much of this publicity is known to be patently false and pure invention, designed to promote her in the most audience-enticing manner, it is impossible to know which of the comments, critiques, and opinions that were attributed to Bara’s fans and detractors actually came from real subjects, and which were made up by the studio’s promotional

department as a way of directing audience reception through modeling and example. The best that can be said, under such circumstances, is that extant publicity nonetheless reveals *how* the film industry wanted the star to be received, and *what* it wanted audiences to think, believe, and feel about Bara. Thus, even if the fan letters, poems, protests, and declarations of hatred or adoration published and presented as the words of “the people” were the inventions of cynical publicists, and therefore not “true” documents of public opinion, they can still be valuable objects of studying the construction of memory. As documents recording and reflecting a particular contextual surround, even patently false artifacts are readable as socio-political commentary. Regardless of truth or falsity, such artifacts have influenced audience reception, both at the time they were originally produced, and through perpetuation in film histories and cultural memory, for later audiences as well.

As I will detail in the rest of this chapter, the interplay of truth, invention, exaggeration, contradiction, and repurposed meanings, a series of imbrications that have become so fused over the decades as to be virtually inseparable, has not only influenced how we remember Bara, but also how we remember the past as a cultural context, and how we think about the people living within that context. Analysis of this interplay can guide us to the cracks in *multiple* discourses of the past, and open our eyes to the varied histories within. It can also push our thinking about reception beyond polar divisions of resistant or complicit, empowering or oppressive, and active or passive, revealing more ambiguous responses and showing that patterns of reception may not always match expectations about how certain groups react to or make meaning of mass culture. Fox Film Corporation’s marketing and publicity of its star relied on conflicting narratives about Bara, while at the same time concealing other information about the actress. Far from directing or delimiting what audiences thought about Bara, this strategy was so full of contradiction and

incongruity that it served (intentionally or not) as fertile ground for idiosyncratic interpretations regardless of social hierarchies or identity politics. To understand the socio-political significance of representations of Bara's ethnicity and sexuality, it is first necessary to situate them in their original historical context.

### **Exoticism, Nativism, and the Vicissitudes of Bara's Contingent Ethnicity**

Considering the prevailing attitudes about non-Americans, immigrants, and gender norms in the United States prior to the First World War, the magnitude of Bara's stardom, comprised as it was from an image of a foreign woman so sexually powerful as to wreck havoc upon the social order, seems on first impression anomalous. Her brief career corresponded with an era in which Theodore Roosevelt's warnings against "race suicide" were still fresh in cultural memory, Madison Grant's hectoring tome of pseudo-scientific racism, *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), was put out by a major publishing house, and public figures could openly espouse the same eugenicist agenda that would, in time, manifest itself in the atrocities of Nazi Germany. The unprecedented escalation of immigration between 1890 and 1917, during which time 17,991,486 immigrants arrived in America (Cashman 147) aroused great cultural anxiety, in large part because it was believed that these recent immigrants, predominantly eastern and southern Europeans, "were less fit than earlier settlers in all aspects—physical, intellectual, economic, and cultural" (Cashman 188). The fear that the American way of life was under siege, with democracy, American values, and the "purity" of Northern European heritage at stake, propelled a growing nativist sentiment. Although the most restrictive and unabashedly biased legislature against "undesirable" immigrants occurred after the war, the prejudices and

nationalism that generated such lawmaking were already firmly entrenched and on the rise during Bara's moment of popularity.

A statement attributed to Bara encapsulates the anxieties "mainstream" Americans supposedly carried at the time. "Politics not so many years ago in central Europe," Bara (purportedly) remarked, "was too often dominated" by vamps (Bara, "Lo"). These words play upon the perceived threats of the sexual, powerful "New Woman" and the dissipated foreigner, unable or unwilling to resist domination by such a woman, both of which were felt to be encroaching on America's established social order. The fact that audience reception of her image was doubtlessly tinged with a deep cultural ambivalence marks one of the triumphs of the marketing ploys through which that image was constructed: her publicists, as well as Fox's screenwriters, seemed to have an uncanny awareness of how to portray Bara as sexual, willfully independent, and quasi-foreign, but stopping just short of these traits becoming *too* controversial while still fully exploiting her tantalizingly "dangerous" qualities.

This would have been an especially tricky balance to strike during this period, when matters of sexual behavior and ethnicity were highly charged socio-political issues. In many Americans' minds, they would have been enmeshed in convoluted and threatening ways. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen are among those who have observed that "in the American lexicon" of the early twentieth century, "the archetype of the sexual woman was European" (66), and frequently of an implied Slavic, southern European, or "Eurasian" ethnicity held by many Americans of the period to be "not quite" white. The usual impression of the vamp, according to Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, was "a sexually active woman often of another race, ethnicity, or nationality" who uses "her potent sexuality to control white men" (211). According to Diane Negra, the "thinly disguised incarnation of the threat of female immigrant sexuality" embodied by the vamp

was compounded by an “underlying fear” in early twentieth-century America over “the efficacy of American economic policies and the ability to maintain cultural isolation.” Thus, the vamp’s objective of demolishing America’s economic and social order, one WASP male victim at a time, made her “a charged figure indeed” (Negra, “Immigrant” 379).

So how did Bara, who conveyed “an allure that transgresses the ideals of Anglo-Saxon white womanhood” (Studlar, “Theda” 114) and has come down to us through conventional film history as the fake “deadly Arab girl” of early cinema, manage to gain such an impressive audience following in this cultural climate? Arguing that sexuality “should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress,” Gayle Rubin writes, “Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity” (4). In this light, Bara might be regarded as a kind of “safety valve,” her star image moderating the mounting concern of white middle class audiences by playing out what they feared, but with qualifying assurances and narrative closure. Lary May, commenting on the ambivalence that the “respectable” bourgeois audiences supposedly courted by the post-nickelodeon film industry of the 1910s felt about onscreen sexuality, proposes that such anxieties would have been mitigated by Bara’s “exotic façade” which safely allowed the audience “to identify sensual evil with foreigners” (106). Because fascination so often accompanies the threat of social rupture, the success of Fox’s star-making publicity was actually abetted by the moral panic<sup>3</sup> occasioned by the rise in immigration of “undesirables,” the resultant fearful speculation on the illicit and mongrelizing sexual behavior of the ethnic Other, and attempts to observe, codify, and control such behavior.

Put another way, one solution to the social anxieties presented by a star like Bara was the objectification of the ethnic Other in the mass media, presented as entertainment. This process of



“othering” is a concerted act of differentiation that stabilizes identity within a subject by exaggerating the separation between such seemingly “natural” binaries as us and them, good and bad, familiar and alien, masculine and feminine. Bara and other film stars were effectively screens onto which the dominant order could project traits (amorality, avarice, self-interest, sexual rapacity, etc.) which it wished to deny in itself onto someone else—someone visibly, spectacularly Other. Sarah Berry describes silent-era vampires as “products of Hollywood’s participation in a long tradition of projecting sexual licentiousness and exoticism onto colonized subjects” (188). Likewise, Benshoff and Griffin observe that “white patriarchal America projecting its sexual fantasies and desires” was a device also used in representations of African American, Asian, and Hispanic women, equating all non-white women with vampirism (211).

This othering action was intrinsic to Bara’s image and popularity, undoubtedly adding some acceptability within 1910s mores. But while othering stabilizes a subject’s own identity in a clearly demarcated contrast to the Other, the process imposes an artificial hierarchy in which the Other is always subordinated. With Bara, evocations of both the supernatural and the exotically foreign in her publicity objectified and commodified her, making ethnicity little more than an intriguing freak show. If, as was likely, the majority of established Americans had little to no meaningful contact with immigrants, the impressions of ethnic types conveyed by Bara’s wicked woman may have come across as justification for prejudicial attitudes towards foreigners.

Thus, while Bara’s ethnicity (both fabricated and, if known or suspected, her “real life” Judaism) likely would have aroused numerous social and racial anxieties, I contend that aspects of her persona were constructed in such a way as to neutralize any real threat such a character presented to the hegemonic order in the United States. Fox’s publicity, contrary to many film

history accounts, made a point of demonstrating that their star was quite a different person offscreen, even stating that she was “herself a firm believer in the science of eugenics” (“Theda Bara in *Romeo and Juliet*” 921). Elsewhere, I have argued in greater detail that the vamp type exemplified by Bara would have defused threats of racial contamination precisely because she bore no offspring (Hain). While the vamp was a threat in that she drained men of their vitality by engaging them in non-procreative sexual activity (thus compromising good breeding stock), at least she would not contaminate the Nordic bloodline by birthing mongrels. All of this reshaped Bara from a nefarious cultural contaminant to a warning against various illicit behaviors, obvious enough to instruct as well as entertain—a social service Bara sanctimoniously promoted with tiresome frequency in the press.<sup>4</sup>

Such strategies for “handling” the cultural anxieties embodied by Bara may also explain why her cinematic vehicles were so frequently historical and/or set in foreign locales. By removing her from the “here and now,” Bara’s threat as an obstacle to American progress and purity was effectively dispelled, while at the same time giving the vamp full reign to flaunt convention. Negra contends Hollywood further underplayed the cultural threat posed by vamps, as well as delegitimized non-American cultures, by representing “the otherness of new ethnicities” as superficial, little more than a surface denoted by costumes and makeup, and just as removable and changeable (“Fictionalized” 184). The very ambiguity of those fabricated ethnicities ensured that vamp actresses could never be seen as the “wrong” type—whichever ethnic group was most troubling Americans at the moment could be rendered separable from an actress’s persona, their ethnicity an appealing flavor rather than anything of serious consideration.

This certainly seems to be the case with Bara. Contradictions in press reports, film roles, and the confusion of both with “reality” ensured that Bara’s ethnicity remained ambiguous, multifaceted, and recognizably artificial, so that while she was decidedly foreign in every sense, she could be anything Fox, the publicists, and the audience wanted her to be. As Mark Winokur observes, “Hollywood was particularly interested in the use of white women as exotics. Their particular ethnic designation is almost irrelevant in their films, or at least very subordinate to the quality of ‘exotica’” (qtd. Bergfelder 67). From the available plot summary information on Bara’s lost films, it seems she appeared as a specified non-American ethnic-type in most of her 40 feature film leading roles, cast as French in nine, Russian in four, British in four, Italian in three, Spanish in two, Romani in two, as well as characters who were Orthodox Jewish, Irish, Mexican, Hawaiian, generic Pacific Islander, and “half-caste East Indian,” not to mention ancient Egyptian and Judean.<sup>5</sup>

This strategy of reducing ethnicity to something along the lines of a spectacular style or surface veneer was by no means limited to Bara’s promotion. Looking at a parallel example, of how another star, contemporary with Bara and even more “problematic,” was constructed and promoted as acceptable, within limits, illustrates the complex ambiguity Americans felt towards the intriguingly exotic but still threatening foreigner. At a time when most leading men were wholesome exemplars of all-American masculinity like Crane Wilbur, Harold Lockwood, Wallace Reid, and Douglas Fairbanks, Japanese-American actor Sessue Hayakawa attained similar status as a matinee idol, but as a thrillingly dangerous alternative—just as Bara was to “safer” leading ladies like Clara Kimball Young, Alice Joyce, and Anita Stewart. During an era in American social history in which racist mania over the “Yellow Peril” was rampant and paranoia about miscegenation became a national obsession, Hayakawa was styled and promoted,

like Bara, as an eroticized ethnic Other; in his study of the star, Daisuke Miyao even makes a direct comparison between Hayakawa, “with ‘heavily made-up’ eyebrows and pale skin,” and Bara’s vamp (288, note 64) (Figure 1.3).

Unlike Bara, however, two undeniable factors compound the astonishing anomalousness of American audiences’ not mere acceptance but fascination with Hayakawa: he was male, and therefore more likely to be seen as threatening, and his ethnicity was visibly “real,” not just a film role or trumped up marketing ploy.

Hayakawa’s most notoriously remembered silent-era performance, from Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* (1915), exemplifies the ambivalence towards foreigners, with his simultaneously sexy-yet-scary character aggressively attempting to sexually possess an haute bourgeois white woman (Fannie Ward) and forcibly barring her shoulder to literally brand her as his property. It is a shockingly frank representation of what nativist



**Figure 1.3:** Hayakawa in the 1910s

Americans most dreaded from the “Yellow Peril” and the moral panic instigated by sensationalistic press stories about “white slavery” and the literal or figurative ownership of white women by non-white men.

Regardless, Hayakawa was one of the most popular stars of the 1910s (particularly with women), and one of the highest paid actors of the silent era. By way of explanation, Miyao regards Hayakawa’s image and ethnicity as discursive constructs that could be manipulated by

studio publicity, casting, and his films' storylines to fit the prevailing national attitudes.<sup>6</sup> Hayakawa's ethnicity, Miyao argues, was positioned in an "in-between" space, between white and non-white, threatening and harmless, erotic and asexual, allowing him to be both enticing and safe, in a way similar to how Bara was promoted. Tim Bergfelder, in his analysis of Hollywood's commodification of the exotic, identifies a similar strategy used in marketing Anna May Wong's ethnicity as "indeterminate" in order to make her more "widely consumable" (72). As Henry Jenkins has argued, a star system that promoted a connection between glamour and a degree of whiteness unsullied by "dirty" sex also required "the erotic allure...of women who are 'sometimes' or ambiguously white, who occupy the racial borderlands between whiteness and blackness" (*Wow* 139).

### **Concocting Exotica: Publicity and Ethnicity**

The equation of Bara and the vamp with borderline-white ethnicities meant, according to Arthur Knight and Hollis Alpert, that "the demarcations between the innocents and the sinful ones were made easily recognizable: The vamps were brunette, and the heroines were blonde" (138). The age-old stereotype of the wicked, dark-haired temptress was obviously part of Bara's image, but could also be modified to simultaneously quell the potentially controversial aspects of her image and play up its contradictions. In a 1916 press report, for example, Bara attempted to convince audiences that coloration (and, implicitly, ethnic origin), had nothing to do with moral character: "I have known women, swarthy, sinuous, with tragic eyes and vivid lips—and the hearts of little children. I have known girls with rosebud mouths and limpid, violet eyes—and the hearts of criminals" (Bara, "Eyes"). Such pronouncements may also have been a form of averting scrutiny into Bara's actual ethnic and religious background.

A 1915 interview, in which she “confesses” to her “citizen of the world” ethnicity, demonstrates the intermingling of truth and fabrication that was so much a part of her promotion, with Bara repeating the publicity ruse that she was French and Italian, but also, more truthfully,



**Figure 1.4:** Fourteen years before the famed publicity photo of Greta Garbo’s face superimposed on the Great Sphinx of Giza, Fox’s advertising for *Cleopatra* underscored the connection between Bara and her supposed birthplace. *The Moving Picture World*, November 3, 1917, page 656.

Russian—“and only one generation removed” (Franklin 71). As this early promotional piece demonstrates, much of the “threat” embodied by Bara would have been mitigated by the fact—again, contra many film histories and the stories that circulate in cultural memory—that Bara apparently was never specifically reported to be of Arab descent while under contract with Fox. While she was indeed originally promoted as having been born “in shadow of the Sphinx” (Figure 1.4) or “on

the sands of the Sahara,” it was made clear that she was of European heritage (although it was *not* always made clear if her parents were married.) Most of the early accounts report that Bara was the

daughter of Giuseppe Bara, an Italian artist who had “come to Egypt to secure the best locations” for his work (Traner), and the variously-named Theda de Coppet or Theda de Lyse or Lysie, “one of the best known of the French emotional actresses” (“Is This”).<sup>7</sup> Following in her (fictional) mother’s footsteps, Bara sought a career as an actress, and reportedly “Her strange nature led her quite naturally to the heavy roles” (“Is This”). Quite naturally, then, she became a

star of Paris's infamous Théâtre Grand Guignol before graduating to the Théâtre Antoine, where she specialized in vamp roles.

While Italian ancestry was shaky ground in 1910s America, with Southern Europeans regarded as possible cultural contaminants by self-styled “native” Americans,<sup>8</sup> Bara's French heritage and Parisian fame were heavily touted. For about the first year of Fox's publicity campaign, she was frequently referred to in the press as “Mlle. Theda Bara,” reporters pronounced her “purely Gallic in type” (“Theda Bara in American Film”), and she was said to have been signed by Fox to star in *A Fool There Was* because “vampires—or at any rate those who look the part—are pretty scarce in the United States” (Greeley-Smith).

A broad intertext, including films, promotional photos, publicity stories, reviews, and advertising have coalesced into a standard amalgam of Bara's image, influencing how her place in film history has been determined more by (faulty) cultural memory than actual evidence. After Bara's films finished their theatrical runs, in most cases never to be seen again, and as memory and imagination superceded the original Fox publicity, details of Bara's ancestry and ethnic typology appear to have been made up at will with each retelling. The most fantastic elements of the publicity, namely, the references to Egypt, the Sphinx, the pyramids, and the Sahara, are understandably the ones most remembered, and as such, these signifiers of the exotic and the arcane are the most available for rearticulation and reinterpretation.

One of the most prominent of these retrospectively altered recollections is that Bara was “Arabian.” Thus, it is now far more common to encounter scoffing commentary on how Bara's publicity painted her as the daughter of a European artist and either an Arabian dancing girl or an Egyptian princess than the (now) less colorful accounts that actually predominated.<sup>9</sup> Even though Middle Eastern exotica were not initially promoted as part of her ancestry, such signifiers

were prominent in constructing her mystique. A 1917 *Motion Picture Magazine* article, for instance, perplexingly referred to Bara as the “Ishmaelite of Domesticity,” suggesting not only Bara’s connection to Arabic culture, but by also dubbing her “the Devil’s Handmaiden” and “the Priestess of Sin” in the same line, indicated to readers that being an “Ishmaelite” equaled evil.<sup>10</sup> In asking the reader to ponder whether Bara is really a “much-maligned and misunderstood ‘good woman’” (a publicity tactic that would have been very familiar by this point), however, the article is also prompting the awareness that the more colorful elements of Bara’s image are likely fabrications (Courtlandt 59).

With confusion and contradiction so much a part of Bara’s promotion, it’s not surprising that as far back as the 1920s film critics and historians were already reimagining and rearticulating the star as more Orientalistically “Other,” and frequently in the context of demonstrating the absurdity of 1910s PR. This is exemplified by Terry Ramsaye’s early cinema history *A Million and One Nights*, originally published in 1926, which demonstrates that from a vantage point only a few years removed from the height of Bara’s fame and popularity, a standard—and not particularly flattering—interpretation of her image, publicity, and audience was already in place:

Conscienceless typewriters plied the motion picture columns of the press with the announcement that Theda Bara was the daughter of a French artist and an Arabian mistress, born on the sands of the Sahara. “Bara” was indeed a mere cipher, being Arab spelled backwards.... “Theda” was just a rearrangement of the letters of “death.” This deadly Arab girl was a crystal gazing seeress of profoundly occult powers, wicked as fresh red paint and poisonous as dried spiders. The stronger the copy grew the more it was printed. Little girls read it and swallowed their gum with excitement. (702-3)



Ramsaye's tongue-in-cheek assessment of Bara and her fans indicates not only that a stock reading of Bara was in place from very early on, but also that with only a handful of intervening years, so much about that reading, of the star, her image, her publicity, and her audience, was not just flippant or limited, but inaccurate.<sup>11</sup> The touting of Bara's name as anagrammatic of "Arab Death," for instance, appears more a matter of retrospective wishful thinking than actuality of Bara's publicity. It appears that the anagram had not been exploited from the beginning of her tenure with Fox, as is typically reported in film histories, but instead didn't occur until around the time of *Cleopatra* (1917), when the publicity was already full of conflicting reports, including several "revelations" about Bara's bourgeois Cincinnati childhood, and had grown so overblown as to signal its artifice.<sup>12</sup>

Without reading too much into this observation, it does perhaps suggest that while Middle Eastern heritage may have been too confrontational for audiences of the 1910s, later audiences would not have regarded mixed French and Italian blood as sufficiently intriguing. Even if audiences of the 1910s saw through the stories about Bara's origins, guessing that it was all fabricated, certain aspects of the publicity might have been off-putting to mainstream audiences. In the cultural climate of the 1910s, implications of miscegenation with a European father and Middle Eastern mother in Bara's publicity would have been risky, but conceivably still acceptable within a sort of adventure tale mode. Considering America's pathological phobia of sexual contact between a white woman and a non-white man, however, later variations of Bara's false lineage in which her *father* was Arab would have been too controversial for the era's nativist bias.

Despite this, and the fact that Bara's early publicity pointedly assured readers that she was of European heritage, in the early 1930s William Fox told Upton Sinclair that "we had every

type of woman on the screen except an Arabian; our publicity director decided the public would like an Arabian.” According to Fox’s version of the early Bara publicity, she was reported to be the child of a French mother and an Arab father (Sinclair 57).<sup>13</sup> Fox’s retrospective revision of the publicity, which likely influenced subsequent film histories,<sup>14</sup> may have been influenced in turn by the intervening idolization of Rudolph Valentino, whose film roles and erotic appeal teased with the suggestion of miscegenation, most notably in *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), in which an “Arabian” male served as object of identification/desire, but was rendered fully acceptable by a late revelation that he is really of European ancestry.<sup>15</sup>

### **The (Un)known Factor: Bara and Judaism**

As with Valentino, Hayakawa, Alla Nazimova, Nita Naldi, and other “exotic” stars of the silent era, publicity and film roles that placed Bara in a liminal space of ethnicity, in which her degree of difference is ambiguous and fluctuating, would likely have quelled mainstream audiences’ apprehension about foreignness. Constructing Bara’s ethnic image as fascinating but safely vague may have been regarded by Fox as a necessary smokescreen in other ways as well; even if Bara’s onscreen and publicity-generated ethnicity was simultaneously fluid and exaggerated enough to signal to even the most unsophisticated audiences that it was all a put-on, there was still the matter of Theodosia Goodman, the actress behind the mask of Theda Bara, and a Jew.

While William Fox, along with many other storied Hollywood moguls (Harry Cohn, Samuel Goldwyn, Jesse Lasky, Marcus Loew, Louis B. Mayer, Joseph and Nicholas Schenk, the Warner Brothers, Adolf Zukor) were Jewish, they were said to be “uncomfortable with their Jewishness” and “wanted desperately to be regarded as Americans and not as Jews” (Libo and Skakun). If this is so, and the cultural climate of the United States at the time suggests that it

was,<sup>16</sup> these studio heads may have regarded keeping the Jewish ancestry of stars such as Bara, Nazimova, Fairbanks, Carmel Myers, and Gilbert “Broncho Billy” Anderson secret from the movie going public as a protection on their investments. Publicity touting Bara’s parents as “adventuresome European artists” meant that her Egyptian birth maintained “a touch of the exotic without giving up the actress’s claim to whiteness” (Studlar “Theda” 124). Bara as a foreign-born French, Italian, or possibly even Arab could be marketed as thrillingly out of the ordinary, while at the same time diverting attention from her true and possibly more troublesome background as a first-generation American of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.<sup>17</sup>

Bara’s persona and look, according to J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, were “specifically Semitic” (152), but it’s questionable whether this Semitism was widely “readable” to a 1910s mainstream audience. While Bara’s biographer Ronald Genini states that the moviegoing public was “well aware” of Bara’s Judaism (19), there is no definitive evidence to suggest one way or another if this is so. Studlar, for one, contends, “there seems to have been no direct reference to Bara’s Jewish origins in star discourse before 1918” (“Theda” 133-4)—a supposition corroborated by my own research into the print media portion of that star discourse. As Studlar also points out, though, the “revelation” of Bara’s real name shortly after the success of *A Fool There Was* “may have allowed some viewers to infer the actress’s Jewish origins” (“Theda” 131).<sup>18</sup> Once again, promotion of the star shows how much contradiction, possibly as a way of cultivating mystique, possibly as a smokescreen, played into the construction of Bara’s image. At least as late as 1920 Bara was reported to be Roman Catholic (Kingsley). Revelations that Bara was “christened” Theodosia Goodman, or reports that a regiment of soldiers had presented her with a communion cup suggest that not everything about her background was made public, even after her contract with Fox ended (Figure 1.5).

There were, however, hints about Bara's Jewish heritage. According to a post on an online silent film fan forum, the letters to the editor column of the August 1917 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* includes a submission from a woman in Columbus, Ohio, who refers to Bara as "nothin' but a Cincinnati kike" (Barafan). By the next year, a reporter for *Photoplay* culminated a belligerent interview with Bara by tauntingly informing her that a mutual acquaintance remembered the star from her pre-film days, when she was playing "second parts" in a small Jewish theater on New York's East Side—information which Bara studiously ignores (Evans, D. 107).<sup>19</sup> Studlar cites an article from the November 1920 issue of *Picture Play* magazine in which the author claims "proof positive" that Bara is "a regular attendant at the synagogue" (134).



**Figure 1.5:** Good (and Christian) enough for Santa. *New Jersey Evening Mail*, December 25, 1915 (no page number). Theda Bara scrapbook, vol. 1. Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Numerous sources offer as evidence of 1910s audiences' knowledge of, and hostility towards, Bara's Jewish heritage a supposed rash of riots across the United States in 1919, in which Irish-American groups reacted violently at the casting of a "Jewess" as an Irish heroine in the film *Kathleen Mavourneen* (Brabin, 1919). As the story goes, Hibernian societies, The Central Council of Irish Associations, The Friends of Irish Freedom, and/or other Irish or Catholic groups, in protest over Bara's casting, threw rocks at theaters, trashed the interiors, detonated stink bombs, broke equipment, destroyed film prints, and terrified and injured patrons.

As a result, Fox was forced to pull the film from distribution and shelve it; the financial loss was the deathblow to Bara's film career.

Retellings of the event appear in sources from screenwriter and film historian DeWitt Bodeen's lengthy 1968 article on Bara for *Films in Review*, to both Genini's and Eve Golden's biographies, to several online sources, including the Wikipedia entry on Bara and a site affiliated with Monash University in Australia (Pringle). None of these accounts cite primary source material for their information, however, and there is little evidence to be found of the film instigating widespread Irish-American rioting. The *Providence News*, March 15, 1920 reported that a protest by the Rhode Island Branch of the Friends of Irish Freedom "and other prominent Irish leaders in Newport" led to the manager of the Bijou Theatre pulling the film, causing a "severe financial loss to him." As the article indicates, objection to the film was based on the depiction of the Irish as poor and backwards, cohabitating with their livestock in their hovels: "Advanced reports from other cities have stated that the picture has aroused almost as strong resentment among the Irish sympathizers as did 'The Birth of a Nation,' among the colored people a few years ago" ("Bijou").

The Rhode Island incident, however, was a protest, not a riot. The only report of a riot that I was able to find, dated February 10, 1919, indicates that a "mob of young men" broke projectors, destroyed or stole films, and caused women in the audience to faint or become hysterical at the opening of *Kathleen Mavourneen* at the Sun Theater in San Francisco, causing \$3000 in damage. The theater's manager told the paper that the riot occurred in spite of cuts made to the film, demanded by two local Catholic priests, prior to public exhibition ("Theda Bara Film Causes Riot").

I was unable to find any other evidence, after a thorough search in various historical newspaper databases, to suggest that full-blown riots went beyond that single incident. Aside from the lack of reportage on what would seem to be both a newsworthy event and a sensationalistic story, the same newspaper databases provide further evidence that *contradicts* accounts that the riots were nationwide and Fox was forced to pull the film from distribution. *Kathleen Mavourneen* played for nearly three weeks in New York with no reported problems; ran in Washington D.C. almost a year later (“Evangeline,” *Washington*); and in 1920 had a *second* run in Chicago, seven months after its first (“Evangeline,” *Chicago*). The Symphony Theater in Los Angeles even scheduled the film as a “St. Patrick’s Day Special” in 1920, complete with “special Irish music and songs that will make your heart jump” (“Symphony”). Considering this is seven months from the time the film screened in New York, and four months after the initial run in Chicago, if there had been any trouble with the film in these heavily Irish-American markets, then showing the film as a St. Patrick’s Day “special” would seem foolish Irish baiting and courting disaster on the part of the theater.

Evidence of anti-Semitism, the key component of later rememberings of the *Kathleen Mavourneen* incidents, is either absent from or well hidden within the official historical register. This is yet another instance where the indeterminacy of fact from fabrication may reveal something significant about how a culture retells its historical narratives, with Bara and early twentieth-century audiences represented in what is perhaps revisionist, or at least exaggerated, historical terms. With *Kathleen Mavourneen*, a film we cannot re-evaluate, the centrality of rioting, anti-Semitism, and Irish hooliganism to the historical narrative reveals much about the collective remembrance/imagining of a past where racial or ethnic intolerance and prejudice was

not merely rampant, but broadly sanctioned, allowing later audiences to feel superior to those benighted bigots inhabiting the past.

Historicizing and politicizing audience reception for Bara's films in this way adds another layer of interest to her star image, heightening its potential to intrigue media consumers, even if it's a case of actual events being hyperbolized and reimagined, with audience intent applied retrospectively and influenced by later interpretations of how the peoples of the past thought and behaved. By framing such anecdotes, true or false, as entertainingly appalling accounts of the "bad old days," however, memory narratives of this kind act as a sort of cultural screen memory, concealing the less obvious, but possibly more insidious, perpetuation of inequality occurring right now; if we come to expect injustice only in terms of the spectacular, of broken windows, rioting mobs, fainting ladies, and stink bombs, then there is a danger of becoming complacent about less readily evident or less colorful acts of injustice, in the past or the present.

As Bara's Judaism has been increasingly acknowledged over time, however, it's become very much a part of the lively discourse constructing her remembrance, appearing to appeal particularly to recent audiences' taste for the ironic. Bara's Jewishness, in fact, has been "revealed" in apparent service of testifying to her ordinariness. In her 1944 autobiography, for example, Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons referred to Bara as "a home-loving, tender-hearted Jewess" from Cleveland (sic) "with an appetite for corned beef and cabbage, and a homespun soul" (*Gay* 33). Bara herself appears to have begun talking openly about her Jewish heritage only long after her association with Fox, and may even have initiated use of the "nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati" designation that is now an almost inevitable addendum to her name. A 1954<sup>20</sup> "whatever happened to?" article cited Bara as telling a previous interviewer (neither

source nor date given) “I was born in Cincinnati and had a perfectly good Jewish father. My name is Theodosia Goodman and I’m really a nice Jewish girl. And that’s all” (“I Wonder”).

### **Interpreting Film from the Margins**

In the retrospective assessment of mainstream 1910s audiences, Bara’s vamp has been interpreted as an embodiment, an exaggeration, and a containment of nativist paranoia about the foreign Other, arousing audiences’ simultaneous desire and dread. She was a figure “you love to hate,” but who could be “put in her place” by film’s end, or reformed (perhaps read as an analogue to assimilation), or in rarer cases, as with *A Fool There Was*, evoke a frisson when the vamp gets away with her wicked ways and receives no moralistic narrative comeuppance. What I’m more interested in, though, is how that same vamp image might have been read by non-mainstream audiences, and specifically the very moviegoers whose ethnicity the vamp has been interpreted as exploiting: southern and eastern European immigrant women and girls negotiating their place and their selfhood in America.

Assessing whether Bara’s image presents audiences with empowering or oppressive images of femininity and ethnicity is a complex matter. The theory of semiotic excess, proposed by John Fiske, gives us one way to begin making sense of this complexity. Fiske argues that while media criticism is often focused on “identifying and revealing... the ideological, hegemonic” work done by a media text, there remains “an excess meaning that escapes the control of the dominant and is thus available for the culturally subordinate to use for their own cultural-political interests,” including “possibly oppositional subcultural purposes” (“Television” 403). While excess is not a precondition of polysemy, in Fiske’s view it expands the likelihood of unexpected, idiosyncratic, or “counter” responses. Acknowledging the impossibility of anticipating any “actual” reading of a text, Fiske argues that the media critic can still identify the



semiotic excesses within the text that encourage polysemic readings. Locating these semiotic excesses facilitates theorizing “the relation between textual structure and social structure that make such polysemic readings necessary” (“Television” 394).

As noted, Bara’s image and publicity abound with semiotic excesses: exaggeration, contradictions, parody, morally inflammatory suggestions, strident opinions, and allusions to the fantastic and supernatural. Foremost amongst these semiotic excesses, the highly stylized, highly fluid construction of Bara’s ethnicity, and the highly exaggerated yet inconsistent representation of her gender performance and sexuality, yield ideas about how reception may have been influenced by race, ethnicity, region, class, gender, and sexuality, and their respective social constructions in the past.

In analyzing the reception of Bara’s image by immigrant women and girls, my research methodology looks to intertextual elements such as stars other than Bara, fiction, popular music, and social workers’ reports that reference specifically the lives of young Ashkenazi immigrant women. These artifacts help to evaluate the parameters of what Richard Dyer has called *structured polysemy* (see introduction) and the social, political, and cultural conditions that determined the “available” range of interpretations, uses, and repurposings of Bara’s star image by these audiences. Contextualization of an artifact as a means of accounting for the amount and kind of controls exerted by power relations can help identify the scope of interpretive possibilities; as Walter Ben Michaels observes, “The most we can say is that we can choose our interpretations but we can’t choose our range of choices” (qtd. Staiger, *Interpreting* 45). Although this is not to deny that individuated readings have the *potential* to exceed, defy, or outright ignore socio-political strictures and interpretive coercion by narrative, rhetorical, or other textual devices, it is to recognize that power relations, in their ubiquity and vicissitudes, *do*

typically exert control and set up situations of influence. Further, trying to determine the intent of that control—in other words, trying to figure out what the “dominant” or “preferred” reading(s) might have been—provides the researcher at least a starting place. This place can be a point of contrast for theorizing the conceivable (or even *inconceivable*) types of counter-responses, the questioning, ironic, individuated, or resistant readings.

“Discursive strategies for making meaning and significance,” Staiger notes, “have an (uneven) relation to the social formation,” adding, “Interpretive strategies do not fall from the skies; they are derived in a material context” (*Interpreting* 58). Of course, even if one theorizes that there is some form of ideological or materialist control over interpretation and use of mass culture, it is impossible to fully account for, or even conceive of, the full range of interpretations and uses within a specific time and place. This range of interpretive choices, Staiger writes, is “of vital political significance,” especially the “misreadings” that “may be cultivated as oppositional gambits in battle against hegemonic etiquette.” Significantly for this study, she also indicates that recognition of misreading as a “historical variable” activates reading strategies as “a political weapon” in which a “fundamental and intentional contrariness” may lead to the formulation of “resisting readers” (*Interpreting* 34).

Dyer’s work, addressing stars as social phenomena, has been especially influential in this aspect of star discourse. Dyer regards the mediated representations performed by stars as “major definers” of conceptions about people within a society, both about the self and others, to the extent that they become “embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which we make our lives” (*Heavenly* 15). Christine Gledhill asserts that stars, “as objects of desire, ‘social hieroglyphs’, and role models provide a vital link between personal identity and politics” (xviii), but ideas about the political ramifications of this linkage and a spectator’s

recognition of a star as somehow representative of the social category/categories in which one finds oneself can be highly polemical.

Even though social categories (and stars as they embody them) influence the ways in which we “make our lives,” Dyer suggests that while we may not be able to determine our own place, we can make do with what is provided, or what we seek out, in popular culture as a means to determining a sense of self. “We’re fascinated by stars,” he contends, “because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres” (*Heavenly* 15). In this way, stars “articulate the business of being an individual” and are important factors in recognizing the social construction of identity (*Heavenly* 16).

Dyer also contends that stars’ images, as embodiments of social categorizations including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and others, are never able to subsume the paradoxes, ambiguities, and instabilities within a society or within the self, thereby revealing the deep cultural contradictions embedded in these categories. As a result, the discursive relationship between stars and audiences is “unstable, never at a point of rest or equilibrium, constantly lurching from one formulation of what being human is to another” (*Heavenly* 16). This argument that instabilities and contradictions have the potential to instigate the reading of a star’s image “against the grain” has had particular impact, and the investment by other scholars in the examination of contradiction undoubtedly has to do with this political component. As Judith Mayne explicates, “Dyer’s larger point is that these contradictions made visible through stars speak to fissures within dominant ideology,” and she situates his work as part of a movement “affirming contradiction as the site where radical contestation begins” (125). Gledhill further adds that along with the contradictions collected within stars’ images, the intertextual nature of

those images also “opens up the possibility for divergent or oppositional readings by different audiences” (xiv).<sup>21</sup>

The matter at hand has less to do with audiences’ awareness of a broad array of publicity accounts, film roles, or other intertextual elements making up a star’s image, but of the contradictions between one’s own lived experiences and representations of life as enacted by stars. Noting that the complexity of star images “makes it impossible to come to any homogenizing conclusions,” Mayne contends, “the analysis of stars may serve to dispel many of the illusions about the very possibility of non-contradictory theoretical absolutes” (128-9). It is precisely because stars’ embodiment of contradictions and paradoxes complicate the representation of social types that they may be of particular use to marginalized groups, an unexpected condition of the marketplace, according to Dyer: “The anarchy of capitalism throws up commodities that an oppressed group can take up and use to cobble together its own culture” (“In Defense” 410). The process of constructing one’s own culture may involve a questioning of social norms. “By following through the chains of association of a star’s incarnation of a social type,” Dyer contends, “some of the contradictions elided in that type can be explored” (*Stars* 50). In this way, contradictions in star image can function as the cracks in the dominant discourse that Keith Jenkins theorizes.

Dyer sees this as well in the “importance of contradictions as they are lived by audience members,” and maintains that those audiences that might experience “a peculiarly intense degree of role/identity conflict and pressure” and a sense of exclusion from the dominant cultural order might also be more likely to form more intense “relationships” with stars.<sup>22</sup> As Paul McDonald states, “The possibilities for resisting dominant cultures provided by star identifications have made stars of key significance to subcultural groups” (“Reconceptualising” 192). The use value

wrested from Bara's star image by many different kinds of viewers has undoubtedly hinged upon its contradictions, discrepancies, and uncertainties, all of which have also been key to that image's accommodation of audiences, from immigrants of the 1910s to goths of the present, remembering and repurposing that image to their specifications.

**“They can no more help vamping men than roses can help giving out their perfume”:  
Bara and Immigrant Women Audiences**

Of course, it is impossible to know how actual spectators made sense of these contradictions, considering the range of life experiences, class, ethnicity, race, religion, age, degree of assimilation, ability to read the English intertitles, and other factors brought by each viewer to each viewing of a Bara film. Bara's vamp could be interpreted in very different ways by nativist and immigrant audiences: feared as a cultural contaminant or hailed as a tool of assimilation by native-born viewers; decried as emblematic of the corruptive influence of American ways or embraced as an ideal of aspiration by foreign-born viewers. Certainly, the problematic aspects are evident of the foreign or ethnic woman objectified, sexualized, and vilified, depicted as amoral and destructive, and in at least some of Bara's films, getting her “comeuppance” through subjugation or death by the conclusion.

At the same time, the vamp's social position at the fringes of society, and whose actions often provided scathing critique of the dominant culture, might have made her a useful site of identification for some viewers. In this section, I explore the possible ways immigrant and first-generation women and girls might have received Bara's image and her films in a manner that aided the process of identity construction under difficult circumstances. I further contend that Bara could be repurposed in a manner helpful to these audiences in working through their

experience of difference, from both American and foreign cultures, and finding in their liminal position the resources for constructing affirming identities balancing American and foreign ways.

As with the process of assimilation, age or generation would have played a major role in reception of American popular culture. In their study of the effects of motion pictures on immigrant girls and women in the early twentieth century, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen focus on the different standards and expectations between immigrant mothers and their typically more Americanized daughters. The urban environment in which many immigrant families settled, the Ewens write, “undercut the basis of traditional womanhood” as it had been understood in the homeland (53). Because daughters worked outside the home or went to school, thus encountering a world beyond the traditional environment of the family or the homogenous village, their expanded circumstances “separated the home-centered experience of mothers from the more social experience of daughters in ways that were painful and difficult to understand” (56). The “price of admission” to American culture required assimilation in ways that demanded a “negation of Old World notions of womanhood” (57).

“Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon city streets and to work under alien roofs,” social reformer Jane Adams wrote in 1909, continuing, “for the first time they are being prized more for their labor power than for their innocence, their tender beauty, their ephemeral gaiety” (qtd. in Bean 10-11). In response to Adams’s apparent optimism, Jennifer Bean cautions, “It would be a mistake to romanticize the freedom of many such young girls, especially those who were among the fifteen million Italian, Jewish, and eastern European immigrants” (11). Freedom from domestic confines and restrictive Old World conventions did not, in this case, mean freedom from prejudice and unfair treatment within American society.

Although the new roles for young women not just permitted but expected in the United States could lead to intergenerational conflict as traditional behaviors and values were questioned, the Ewens maintain that immigrant parents had far fewer reservations about their children attending nickelodeon motion picture programs than about their participation in other “recreational opportunities of the city,” because moviegoing was “the one American institution that had the possibility of uniting generations” (57). The Ewens also contend that the silent picture plays of the nickelodeon era “spoke primarily to urban immigrant audiences of women and children, themselves caught up in the social drama of transformation” (54).

Evaluating the importance of cinema venues as a public space for women, whether established or new Americans, to socialize outside the domestic sphere has been a major topic of feminist study of early cinema. Looking specifically at the role cinema played in the lives of immigrant women, Miriam Hansen refers to “The jumble of strange and familiar, of old and new, of ordinary and exotic,” experienced in nickelodeons as “an objective correlative of the immigrant experience.” She regards the theater environment in relation to Foucault’s conception of the heterotopia, an “in-between” space in which the structures that organize everyday life are in flux, and she therefore sees it as an alternative public sphere, resulting in “a medium that allows people to organize their experiences on the basis of their own context of living, its specific needs, conflicts, and anxieties” (108). Hansen therefore makes the case that cinema helped immigrants “organize their experiences on their own terms,” including the capacity to envision different social environments and a better future (111).

Conversely, Paula Marantz Cohen sees motion pictures as having an assimilationist effect—one she appears to regard as a positive social force. The vision of reality portrayed in silent-era film, she maintains, “harmonized and smoothed over differences, bringing a diverse

America to a belief in the possibility of remaking oneself according to certain prescribed guidelines” (16). At the same time, she also theorizes film’s potential to motivate action towards a more inclusive nation: “By representing America to itself, silent film offered its audiences the opportunity to ‘see’ the limits and omissions of its representations and, in time, to demand revision” (18).

A 1913 article, “The Jewish Immigrant Girl in Chicago,” written for *The Survey* journal of social work by Viola Paradise of the Immigrants’ Protection League of Chicago, offers evidence that, at least in part, supports this argument. Basing her conclusions on information collected from nearly 2,000 young female Jewish immigrants, primarily from Russia, Paradise’s assessment of the cinema’s depiction of a very specific American way of life is ambivalent, although she emphasizes the centrality of affordable entertainment to immigrants. The “nickel show,” wrote Paradise, was almost the only amusement most immigrants could conceive of. There, the newly arrived immigrant girl “hears Yiddish jokes and songs and American popular music, and she marvels at the wonders of the moving-pictures” (701).

Paradise felt that immigrant women were more impressionable than at any other time in their adult life in their first few months after arriving in the United States (704). Further, for a number of reasons, including the fact that “greenhorns” were targets of mockery, Paradise claimed “Perhaps no other immigrant is so eager to become Americanized as the Jewish girl.” Although this was in part because “there is ingrained in her nature a passion for conformity,” and that she “dreads being different,” Paradise also held that the young Jewish immigrant was “willing to be better than her neighbor” (703). Looked at this way, anxiety about assimilating and fitting in, with all the implications of identity crises, family strife, and erasure of cultural distinctiveness, may have been tempered with newly realized drive and ambition.



With a convention of movie attendance already in place for many immigrants and ethnic groups, regardless of generation or degree of acculturation, cinema could be interpreted as an agent of compulsory or coercive assimilation, especially in the post-nickelodeon era of Bara's stardom, when—as has been argued—the film industry sought increased patronage from an expanded audience base, luring the “respectable,” native-born middle class into upgraded theaters with films marked by more complex narratives, refined technique, and an increasingly sophisticated cinematic syntax. Nonetheless, Hansen remarks that even after the “final implementation” of classical codes in cinema, it's very likely that “considerable tension” remained between the idealized spectator sought by the industry and the empirical audience, in all of its diversity, with the capacity to read films in “culturally and historically specific” ways (245).

Part of the combined maturation and expanded marketing of motion pictures was the development of the star system, in which the film industry perpetuated certain archetypes of femininity—archetypes that the Ewens claim held a capacity “to raise sexual issues and develop imagistic fantasies that spoke directly to the confusing sexual experiences of immigrant daughters” (66). Amongst these archetypes, they include the vamp, which they position as “the symbol of the war between passion and respectability” (66), with Bara in specific identified as a figure who “reverses the traditional assumptions of the male-female relationship” and in defying social conventions provides “a clear critique of the double standard” (67). Most importantly, however, the Ewens suggest that increased experience, both positive and negative, with American culture, at work, school, or through the movies, not only gave young immigrant women new ways of regarding femininity, but also generated a sense of independence and capability that went beyond mere assimilation to a determination to work for the betterment of

their social and political situation: “The concerns and experiences of immigrant daughters, as opposed to those of their more homebound mothers, led in some cases to active participation in the trade-union movement, political life, and involvement in the suffrage movement” (62).

In spite of the fact that life in America afforded young women immeasurably more opportunities, Paradise pointed out that young immigrant women were often painfully aware that their opportunities were still limited, and that in spite of hard work and sacrifice, the American Dream was out of reach for many. American culture, including motion pictures and other popular entertainments, glamorized a type and degree of consumption that could become a danger in the face of frustration and thwarted hopes, perhaps driving the young female immigrant to take “a wrong way to get the luxuries which America has taught her to crave.” Since the immigrant girl has already “revised or demolished so many of her standards” in trying to assimilate, Paradise concludes, “the temptation to relax the old standards of morality is sometimes difficult to resist” (704).

This is, in fact, what Negra identifies as among the primary reasons the vamp figure was “demonized” for established Americans, in that she “subverts the system to insinuate an economic/social position for herself that she has not fundamentally earned” (“Fictionalized” 186). Negra argues that some audiences with nativist sentiments may have regarded vamps as connected to aristocratic privilege and a sense of Old World entitlement that runs counter to egalitarian American values and the motivating rigor of the Protestant work ethic. Either despite or because of this, Negra deems a potential pleasure of the vamp to be her correspondence “to a fantasy of ethnicity as preindustrial freedom to engage in primitive, unregulated behavior” (“Fictionalized” 195).

In this instance, Negra appears to be theorizing the potential appeal of the unrestrained, “primitive” woman from the perspective of the established American. Importantly, however, in light of Paradise’s observation that “The very things which strike the native-born as foreign” appear “distinctly American” to the young female immigrant (701), the vast number of viewers who fell outside the Anglo-Nordic and native-born contingent were likely to regard the vamp, her unruliness, and her glamorous, decadent, and “exotic” lifestyle as foreign, too. Bara, in this sense, was potentially alien to both groups, identifiably Other and a point of self-comparison and contrast for Americans both established and acclimating.

In trying to make sense of the mixed messages coming from both the parent culture and American social pressures, immigrants may have been better equipped to read into Bara’s image, to locate elements exceeding narrative or commercialization that could speak to their own circumstances and validate their liminal position between old and new.

Shifting focus from the dominant perspective and exploring cultural artifacts that reflect the perspective of the immigrant can provide insight into ways that Bara might have been read and made use of by recently arrived and first-generation women contending with culture shock, generational divides over gender expectations, and new ways of being in a new country. Two examples, the Yiddish-language films of Molly Picon and the fiction of Anzia Yezierska, indicate how eastern European Jewish women understood and communicated about their own experiences of immigration and acculturation. As Hollywood productions, Bara’s films neither directly reflect an immigrant/first-generation perspective, nor examine matters of particular concern to such groups. The centrality of reading ethnicity into her image, however, for mainstream and marginalized audiences alike, suggests how diverse audiences might have been

able to “poach” her image and make use of it, perhaps in a similar way to more niche-oriented, less accessible works such as Yiddish-language films or English-language “highbrow” literature.

Looking at Bara’s image in comparison with these two examples may thus expand our understanding of the historical reception by non-mainstream groups, and their response to mainstream media including Hollywood films. Identifying some of the interpretations and uses more conceivably within the horizon of expectations for Picon’s films or Yeziarska’s fiction can point towards related ways of reading Bara’s image that might otherwise be overlooked. In the same way that ethnic-oriented entertainment of the early twentieth century often addressed the search for balance between tradition and assimilation, both Picon’s films and Yeziarska’s fiction model ways of life that do not require total assimilation to achieve happiness, and speak to the personal benefit of holding on to, or even re-cultivating, ethnic difference as part of one’s identity.

American-born singer and comedienne Picon, described by the Jewish Women’s Archive as an iconic figure who “helped her audiences appreciate their immigrant past and forge new American Jewish identities” (“Molly Picon: Introduction”), was known for vivacious ingénue roles in Yiddish theater and film. In her 1980 autobiography, Picon makes reference to her cultural in-between-ness, describing herself as an “all-American girl... absolutely illiterate about Jewish culture,” who had to go to Europe to learn to speak Yiddish (“Molly Picon: Marriage”). The Picon vehicle *Ost und West* (English titles *East and West*, *Good Luck*, Abramson and Goldin, 1923), made in Austria and thought to be the earliest surviving film using Yiddish intertitles, perhaps best demonstrates what her star image represented for audiences. The film parodies the clash between new and Old World ways of life that may have troubled some viewers. Picon’s character, “a feisty secularized American Jewish girl” (“Molly Picon: Film



**Figure 1.6**

Debut”) and her father are invited back to Poland for a family wedding. Picon’s character, participating in what she thinks is a mock wedding, actually becomes married to a shy yeshiva scholar who “forsakes tradition and joins the secular world to win her

heart” (“East and West”). With her bobbed hair and bee-stung lips, Picon’s depiction maximizes the contrast with Old World ways, embodying a brash American modernity whose ignorance of or intentional thwarting of shtetl conventions is an extension of her natural exuberance. In one scene, she teaches a group of young Hassidic bachelors how to do a shimmy dance. Although traditionally this would be regarded as scandalous, here it’s shown as playfully innocent (Figure 1.6).

While on the surface Picon and Bara appear to have little in common other than modernity, audacity, and (perceived) ethnicity, I’m interested in the intertextual dialogue represented by their star images, and the differing perceptions each presents on particular matters of concern. Rather than improper or sexy, Picon’s shimmy, for example, is depicted simply as an aspect of her character being young, modern, and American; Bara’s sexual wiles, in contrast, are shown to be symptomatic of European decadence. While Bara’s vamp, ambiguous in her ethnicity, is almost always a solitary predator, isolated and in opposition to familial unity,

Picon's not just recognizably but spiritedly ethnic characters double their community and connection to others by bridging American modernity and Old World traditions. Picon modeled an identity that was thoroughly American but proudly ethnic; Bara seemed to be neither one thing nor another, hovering in a liminal space of an identity alien to all.

The contrast or conflict between Bara's image and that of Picon, or other ethnic performers, I contend, opens a space in which a racially or ethnically marginalized viewer could observe the performance of identity at a critical distance, negotiating one's own process of identity construction by selecting or rejecting those aspects of assimilation or tradition that best fit a particular context. Bara's contingent ethnicity, whether in onscreen roles or offscreen publicity, could productively demonstrate to audiences how to perform a version of the self dependent on context, but could also reinforce social messages that certain ethnicities are more "acceptable" than others. Picon's readily apparent ethnicity could be a form of affirmation for the viewer but could also encourage a self-ghettoization—and also wouldn't have had much reach in the United States outside a small, northeastern urban enclave. What both stars' images and performances share, though, is their capacity for demonstrating to audiences how new identities could transcend confusion or conflict between here and there, past and present.

This kind of confusion and conflict is a frequent theme in the fiction of Yezierska, a Polish-Jewish author who immigrated to the United States as a child in 1890. Writing from the perspective of the ethnic immigrant looking at American society from its margins, Yezierska attracted critical attention beginning in the mid-1910s. Her short stories "How I Found America" and "America and I" conveyed the disillusion young immigrant women felt upon finding out their hopes and dreams about "the land of opportunity" had little basis in reality. "The Fat of the Land" explored the intergenerational conflict between an immigrant mother and her successful,

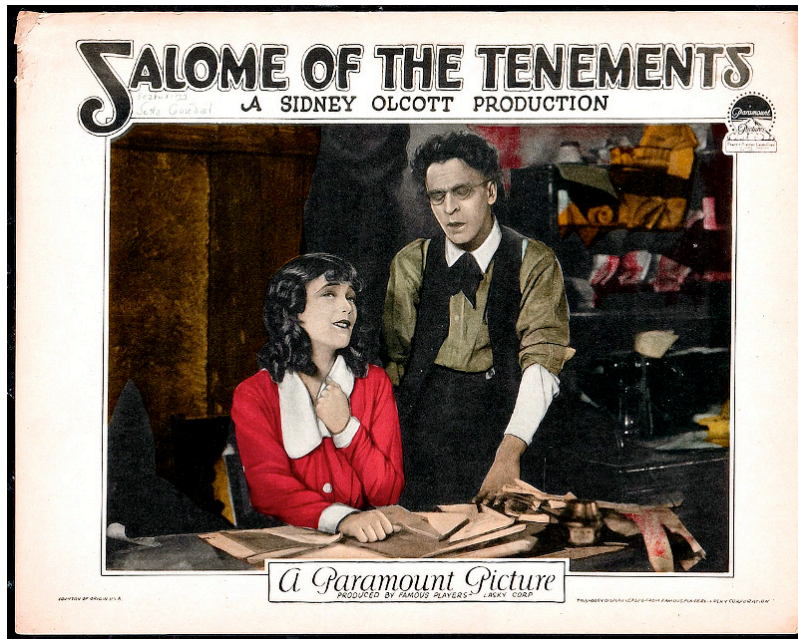


Figure 1.7

fully assimilated adult children. Yeziarska's first novel, *Salome of the Tenements*, published in 1923, was a fictionalized account of the life of Russian-Jewish immigrant and political activist Rose Pastor Stokes. The novel was adapted for screen in 1925 by the Famous

Players-Lasky Corporation and

starred Dutch-born Jewish actress Jetta Goudal, whose star image, like Bara's, traded on exotic seductiveness (Figure 1.7).<sup>23</sup> Sonya Vrunsky, the analogous character and eponymous "Salome," is young, vivacious, and beautiful. Because of her ease interacting with American men, she is considered a vamp by Gittel, an older, more world-weary female colleague at the *Ghetto News* where Sonya is a reporter: "'Women like Sonya are a race apart,' she philosophized. 'They can no more help vamping men than roses can help giving out their perfume'" (11).

Yeziarska depicts Sonya's "vampish" qualities as markers of her ambition and self-confidence, while Gittel's disapproval and misreading of Sonya's vitality as something sordid is indicative of her rigidity, envy, and inability to move beyond the restrictive gender expectations of the Old World. This speaks to the double-bind many first-generation women may have experienced, whose Americanized behaviors and outlooks might have estranged them from family and ethnic communities, but might also still be looked down upon by established Americans as the foreign Other. Moving beyond this imposed sense of difference is a key theme

of Yezierska's novel, and she repeatedly contrasts Sonya with native-born Americans who are represented as cold, repressed, and "anaemic" in comparison to the "burning fire of the Russian Jew." Sonya falls in love with John Manning, a wealthy native-born blueblood politician who is enthralled by her "primitive," "resistless power" (37); when Manning tells Sonya she is different from American women, she replies, rather floridly,

Your American women! I couldn't be like them if I stood on my head.... In their company, I feel like a wild savage in a dressed up parlor of make-believes. Every gesture I make, every word I say is a shock to their lady-like nerves.... They can hold in their feelings like they hold their little dogs on chains.... Their heads are like ice over their hearts.... But with me, my heart is over my head. No chains of training can hold me in. My feelings let loose in me like the suppressed avalanche of centuries.... I am a Russian Jewess, a flame—a longing. A soul consumed with a hunger for heights beyond reach. I am the ache of unvoiced dreams, the clamor of suppressed desires. I am the un-lived lives of generations stifled in Siberian prisons. I am the urge of ages for the free, the beautiful that never yet was on land or sea. (37)

"And I," Manning responds, "am a puritan whose fathers were afraid to trust experience" (37).

Such characterization, in which the very traits that make immigrants feel "un-American" or somehow "lesser" are celebrated as characteristic of the vibrancy and soulfulness of the foreign-born, reinforce a stereotype of the overly or inappropriately emotive foreigner. Representing this difference as superiority, however, has an obvious appeal for those who may feel oppressed by a strange and contemptuous culture—even if assimilation coerced immigrants to subdue or conceal such traits. Due to the melodramatic nature of most of Bara's film roles and



an acting style that, based on surviving film footage, stills, and some reviews, was stagy and histrionic even for the 1910s (Figure 1.8), established Americans and immigrant audiences alike may have regarded her overwrought emoting as a signifier of ethnicity.

Misunderstood by family and by established Americans alike, young immigrant women may have identified with Bara as the “odd woman” outside the social norm. While Bara could be read as critique of that norm, immigrant audiences still had to grapple with the matter of which “normal” they were included in or excluded from. The flouting of convention so much a part of Bara’s image conceivably could have modeled a way of making a life that surmounted the cultural clash and conflicting expectations of normalcy. Although she has been held in cultural memory as an amoral villainess, surviving synopses of Bara’s films indicate the she frequently played characters who are driven to destructive actions out of revenge for abusive or unjust treatment by men. True, her characters’ sometimes-disastrous impact on social norms was typically shown to be excessive, misdirected, and self-destructive, but it’s not hard to imagine that Bara’s temporary trouncing of patriarchal conventions might have resonated not only with immigrant and first-generation women and girls living with confusion, frustration, or anger over their social circumstances, but with many other audience members regardless of gender or ethnicity. Even if Bara was depicted as immoral and devious, she was also frequently shown to have become independent, powerful,



**Figure 1.8:** Bara as Lady Isabel in *East Lynne* (Bracken, 1916), one of only three extant features starring Bara.

and strong through tribulation, and therefore could have been readable as a model of some kind of unconventional success by female audiences starved for any such representation of women, no matter how problematic.

My comparison of Bara to the heroines of Picon's films and Yeziarska's fiction is not intended to imply that historical audiences were making such comparisons themselves, actively reading them against one another. Rather, as artifacts originating from the perspective of a specific group in a specific historical context, I find them suggestive of the under-explored ways Bara's image may have been received. By indicating how immigrant women negotiated their experiences as new Americans, these artifacts convey information about how this group made use of both Old World tradition and American popular culture in that process, and how their experiences easily could have made reading Bara's image against the grain probable. As noted, however, works such as those by Picon and Yeziarska were culturally marginal, with limited influence. Popular, more mainstream media not only colored how dominant social groups regarded foreigners, but also could and undoubtedly did influence how immigrants, regardless of age, gender, or nationality, regarded themselves. This power to influence was recognized by foreign- and native-born Americans alike. The overly impressionable, "fresh off the boat" naïf who could be unduly affected by exposure to the motion pictures and other media to which established Americans had become jaded, was a source of parody and humor.

Two examples of popular songs contemporary with Bara's career, both satirizing young Jewish girls' attempts to be glamorous and "dangerous," specifically invoke Bara as a key component of the parody. "Since Sarah Saw Theda Bara," a 1916 song with lyrics by Alex Gerber and music by popular ragtime composer Harry Jentes, details the transformation of

one Sarah Cohn, identified by Hoberman and Shandler as a stereotypical “ghetto girl” (277), after being enthralled by a Bara film. The cover illustration for the song’s sheet music shows, in



**Figure 1.9**

a circular inset, an audience at a movie theater, watching what is presumably Bara onscreen, working her wiles, posed flamboyantly in contrapposto, with one hand at her breast and the other flung melodramatically overhead (Figure 1.9). The larger image depicts a dark-haired young woman, striking the same exaggerated pose in front of a full-length mirror, wrapped toga-like in what appears to be either a bedspread or curtains. Sarah, who the song describes as attending a moving picture show every night, there

observes the “Vampire Queen” in action: “She saw men fall for her dev’lish smile/But she fooled them all the while.” Impressed, Sarah determines “It’s an easy game/I think I can do just the same” The first chorus then informs,

Since Sarah saw Theda Bara, she became a holy terror.  
 Oi, how she rolls her eyes. Oi, she can hypnotize.  
 With a wink she’ll fascinate, and she wiggles like a snake.  
 She’ll take you and try to break you. Then like a Vampire she’ll “vamp” away.

The second chorus adds

One kiss from her and you are done,  
'Cause her lips, they are just like chloroform  
Since Sarah saw Theda Bara, she's a wer-ra, wer-ra dangerous girl. (Jentes and Gerber)

The Yiddish “oi” in the lyrics, along with “wer-ra, wer-ra,” apparently meant as an imitation of an eastern European-accented pronunciation of “very, very,” further evokes old world Jewish ethnicity and in-process acculturation. Referencing another satirical piece of music, “Sadie Salome,” about “the stage-struck daughter of Jewish immigrants who had settled in Cincinnati,” Studlar notes that Bara was only one fortunate instance amongst countless girls who attempted to become famous by transforming themselves into “sinful Salomes,” but also points out that the desire for this kind of lifestyle represents a “thorough Americanization” of the female immigrant’s perspective (“Theda Bara” 131).

Some aspects of “Americanization” for immigrant women would have meant a different, less submissive relationship to men, but such developments appear to have elicited a degree of misogynist response from male immigrant and native-born Americans alike. Artifacts such as Alice Guy Blaché’s 1912 film *The Making of an American Citizen*, in which a Russian immigrant is made to learn that his savage abuse of his wife isn’t tolerated in the United States, demonstrated that more enlightened, if not exactly more equitable, relations between the sexes was the American way. The vamp image in general, and the lyrics to “Sarah” in specific, however, reveal anxiety that more freedom and a more equal status for women would “endanger” men:

Sarah's got sweethearts by the score  
They all hang around her door  
And buy her all such fancy things  
She's got a dozen engagement rings  
She can't make her naughty eyes behave  
She charms the men and makes each one her slave  
They fall for her, but she lets them lay  
Oi, she's got a dangerous way (Jentes and Gerber)

“Rebecca (Came back from Mecca),” a 1921 number composed by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, is less explicitly about a Jewish girl. The fact that both composers were Jewish, and one edition of the sheet music indicates that Jewish comedian Eddie Cantor had sung the song in the Broadway revue *The Midnight Ramblers*, however, suggests the song was, like “Since Sarah Saw Theda Bara,” intended as a parody of an ostentatious yet naïve “nice Jewish girl.” The Orientalist tableau illustrating another edition of the sheet music makes obvious visual reference to Bara’s *Cleopatra*, with costume and hairstyle unmistakably based on promotional photos from the film (Figure 1.10, Figure 1.11). The female figure in the illustration is shown in the same sensuous lounging pose that came to be identified with Bara, on a bed ornamented with an ancient Egyptian motif, and smoking a cigarette. The lyrics of the song are delivered from the perspective of a neighbor, who tells how twenty-three-year-old Rebecca “saw an oriental show and then decided she would go to Mecca across the sea.” The neighbor, who apparently thinks Mecca is in Turkey, continues,

And so she went one day to Turkey far away, and she lived near the Sultan's den  
She stayed just two years, got full of new ideas, and now she's back home again.  
Since Rebecca came back from Mecca all day long she keeps on smoking Turkish  
tobacca;  
With her veil upon her face, she keeps dancing 'round the place

And yesterday her father found her with a Turkish tow'l around her  
 Oh! Oh! Ev'ry one's worried so; They think she's crazy in the dome;  
 She's as bold as Theda Bara, Theda's bare but Becky's barer  
 Since Rebecca came back home. (Kalmar and Ruby)



**Figure 1.10**



**Figure 1.11**

The subsequent lyrics focus primarily on Rebecca's new taste for skimpy clothing, if any, repeating the same kind of Orientalist fantasies about belly dancers and harem girls that fed into Bara's image. Based largely on the work of Edward Said and postcolonial theory, cultural studies regards Orientalism as a kind of colonialism through representation, in which the exaggeration of the strange and exotic in the ethnic Other makes that Other simultaneously inscrutable and consumable. From a reception studies perspective, Orientalist representation becomes a bit more

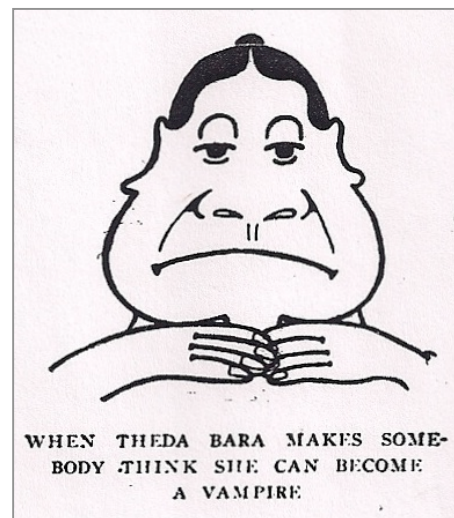


complicated. Studlar identifies the kind of “Hollywood Orientalism” used to construct and promote Bara as a major factor in the adaptability of her image, saying that Bara’s stardom “stood at the intersection of transformative femininity, sexual anarchy, and Orientalism” (“Theda” 122). The Orientalist spectacle playing out onscreen, she contends, was designed to appeal especially to women, “trading on female fantasies in relation to the indulgence of both consumer and sexual desires beyond the established boundaries of proper social norms” (“Theda” 121).

“Native” American men were not the only ones to regard Bara and her callow imitators as a source of humor or even a target of ridicule. In a musical sketch for the 1916 *Ziegfeld Follies*, Jewish comedienne Fanny Brice burlesqued Bara with a song titled “I’m Bad.” In a 1925 interview with the *Saturday Evening Post*, though, Brice said that her performance was not meant to parody Bara so much as the naïve girls who tried to emulate her vamp image. Barbara W. Grossman writes that Brice actually “wanted to satirize these incompetent imitators, the young girls who took Bara’s example to ridiculous extremes.... Far from being mysterious and seductive,

Brice found these self-styled ‘man destroyers’ ‘funny,’ ‘pathetic,’ and perfect for a song” (96). (Figure 1.12).

While the songs by Gerber and Jentes, Kalmar and Ruby, and Brice regard young women emulating “exotic” behaviors and movie stars as humorous pretension, a case can also be made



**Figure 1.12:** Along with the sheet music and Brice’s parody, this cartoon further attests that 1910s audiences found the aspiration to Bara-esque vampery by the unlikely and the oblivious to be humorous. Source and date illegible. Theda Bara scrapbook, vol. 1. Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

that the kind of acculturation parodied in the lyrics would have held some benefit for young women. Jonathan Friedlander, in curating an exhibition of Orientalist sheet music, wrote of “Rebecca” and another song titled “Lena from Palesteenaa,” that the young women in the songs were “also transforming the mores of their own society.” He argues, “Their voyages and experiences, told in lyrics and song, underscore women's emancipation and liberation from the grip of inequality and dominance” (Friedlander).

Whether or not viewers were aware of Bara's Jewish heritage, or even of the publicity campaigns painting the star's ethnicity in various colors, her film roles as assorted foreign types, or perhaps simply the fact that she seemed the dark-haired, womanly, exotic antithesis to doll-like blonde paragons of Anglo-Saxon American femininity like Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish, in all likelihood opened her image to idiosyncratic readings by immigrant and first-generation audiences. Remarking on the film industry's depiction of ethnicity as a “consumable pleasure,” Berry cautions that exploration of “the controversial popularity of ‘ethnic’ beauty” requires looking carefully “at the discourses around it, such as the way that racial difference was used in marketing, and the range of readings that such strategies made available” (182). She gives the example of the “diversification of aesthetic ideals rather than the promotion of exclusively nativist, ‘white’ beauty” in Hollywood's golden age, making the case that this was an outgrowth of “The cosmetics industry's maximization of its market through exoticism” (188).

While, as noted earlier, the indeterminacy of Bara's ethnicity was tied to the commodification of a safely equivocal exoticism that reduced ethnicity to little more than a changeable costume, Bara's ethnic ambiguity, along with the contradictions and discrepancies in press reports, would have also expanded her image's potential use value to a broader range of ethnic audiences. If, as Studlar contends, Bara's Jewishness “transgressed normative



requirements of female stardom in terms of ethnic, religious, and even (as perceived by some Americans) ‘racial’ difference” (“Theda” 116), then Bara conceivably was a kind of representation by proxy, standing in for any number of ethnic groups wishing to see themselves depicted in mainstream popular culture.<sup>24</sup> In this way, Bara’s image was ripe for ethnic-based repurposing.

While Bara’s contrived, fluid ethnicity was thus likely to have held appeal for many immigrant groups, male and female, there is evidence to suggest that African Americans also found some aspect of the Bara image appealing or pertinent. A caption under a photo of Bara from the April 1917 issue of *Photo-Play Journal* reads, “According to statistics conscientiously gathered, there have been a total of 162 babies named after Theda Bara in the last two years” (“According to statistics”). In her biography of Bara, Golden adds that an uncredited press release also reported that Bara’s new namesakes were “all white!” (*Vamp* 111). The African-American newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, however, indicates that this was not entirely true. In 1940, the paper printed a photo of new graduates of the Bishop Tuttle Training School, including Theda Bara Briggs of Kingston, NC (“Bishop”). Miss Theda Bara Lee, according to a column devoted to news from Tarrytown, NY, received her degree as a registered nurse in 1948 (Kingsland 1948); two years later, the same columnist reported on Theda Bara Lee’s wedding (Kingsland 1950).

Additionally, in 1952 in his column for the *Defender*, Langston Hughes told readers “If You Remember These Things Then Gimme Five.” Among the memories listed was “Theda Bara, the sultry siren of the silver screen” (Hughes). Although it is difficult to arrive at any definite conclusions from the *Defender* material about what Bara meant to some spectators among African American audiences, the fact that she was considered memorable, and moreover

that at least a handful of families continued to name their baby girls after Bara on into the 1920s, indicates that she had a degree of importance in the lives of some black moviegoers. The thin line that separates race from ethnicity, and that made Bara not-exactly-white to nativist audiences, might also have made Bara readable as a stand-in for blackness in the cinematic vacuum of racial representation.

Just as Bara had no single, readily identifiable ethnic type, the many other ambiguities and contradictions of her image are recognizably cracks in the dominant discourse. Writing on the ways cultural productions obtain and retain value, Barbara Herrnstein Smith concludes that an artifact's "cultural endurance" increases, in the words of Cynthia Erb, "in proportion to its capacity to fulfill an assortment of desired functions when first exhibited" (Erb 24). The ability of Bara's image to fulfill a number of desired functions, both when it first appeared and in the intervening decades, is a direct ramification, I argue, of the diversity of individuals able to make use of that image for varying, even conflicting, ways for making sense of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social position in their own lives. I further contend that the array of semiotic excesses conveyed by Bara's image raised a sense of the unnaturalness of social categorization, suggesting to audiences that a human subject cannot be reduced merely to a limited set of labels: if Theda Bara is presented as a figure who can't quite be pinned down, who can't be conclusively assigned to certain categories, then perhaps a fan might see herself in the same way.

### **Bara and Male Audiences—More than just Sex**

Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, scores of "Whatever Happened To?" articles about Bara appeared as features in newspapers and magazines. Accompanying one such article, an old publicity photo—among the most reproduced of all images of Bara—presents her sheathed in

black, bare shoulders, bare arms and barefoot, grasping her hair and holding it at arms' length above her head while she glowers at the camera (Figure I.6). "'Acting' like this by Theda Bara," the caption informs readers "drove Grandpa wild" (Prevor ). These words indicate an assumption, long presumed as axiomatic, that since Bara was one of the first (if not irrefutably *the* first) female stars whose celebrity was dependent upon eroticism and the sexual themes of her films, she was targeted to or particularly popular with male audiences. As Studlar observes, this assumption that the star "appealed primarily to men" as a "dangerous fascination" was "satirized in limericks, satirical stories, songs, and poems that sprang up almost immediately after her first film successes and lasted longer than her stardom" ("Theda" 121). Further, as the sarcastic tone of the caption also indicates, later generations betray a tendency to make fun of "Grandpa" and his cohort as uncouth old fools for finding anything as contrived and hokey as *this* arousing. Part of the humor in later commentary on Bara seems to derive from changing perceptions of beauty, although it should be acknowledged that the full-figured, rather matronly Bara was not every man's erotic ideal, even in the 1910s.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, the assessment of Grandpa's response to Bara reveals yet another instance of historical arrogance, a presumption that we can read the minds of the people of the past and conclusively "know" what they thought and felt. As I've explored thus far, the fullness and unexpectedness of possible responses to Bara's image by audiences perceived as marginalized, oppressed, or subcultural is an important part of understanding how cultural memory, as shaped by the consumption and use of popular culture, can be read as an alternative historical record. Uncovering an alternative historical record, however, is not just a revisionist enterprise of locating the previously concealed or ignored voices, but demands questioning and complicating responses emerging from what is perceived to be the representatives of hegemony. In discussing

ways to bring analysis of cultural hegemony “down to earth,” Todd Gitlin proposes a similar idea, writing that in the quest for answers to broad questions about our social situations, “‘Hegemony’ becomes the magical explanation of last resort.” Gitlin argues this “last resort” clearly should not be regarded as some “guide to action” that provides a comprehensive view of a culture: “If ‘hegemony’ explains everything in the sphere of culture, it explains nothing” (575). Such “last resort” interpretations of the past delimit our understanding of the way things have come to be the way they are, and of the existence of alternative ways of being not just in the past, but in the present and future.

Interrogating and exploring the ostensibly hegemonic readings—in this context, that of the white, established American, middle-class, heterosexual male—leads to the recognition of complexity even in this supposedly homogenous perspective. Possibly because white male middle-class audiences *did* represent the most mainstream audience response of the period, firsthand historical accounts of this group’s responses to Bara’s image are somewhat more easily located than that of immigrant women and other marginalized groups.

My investigation in this part of the chapter draws upon such intertextual artifacts, along with publicity stories, popular literature, World War I propaganda, and hygiene pamphlets, to move beyond the standard assumption that men objectified Bara as a sex object, and that her image was no more than a misogynist embodiment of men’s fears of women. While there is truth in these readings, and that Bara may have represented a vicarious sexuality for men as much as she represented a vicarious power for women, it is not the full story: Bara meant more to audiences, and not just to women or oppressed minorities. As Staiger notes, it is taken for granted “that the vampire can be considered a projection of male fear or hatred of women,” but there is still room to wonder, “what else does the vampire connote?” (*Bad* 149). While the

readings of Bara's images by male audiences I've discovered may not be quite identifiable as progressive or feminist, they at least challenge certain ideas about how men respond to female stars.

Staiger, along with Hansen, Negra, Shelley Stamp, and Jacqueline Stewart have produced some of the most significant media reception studies projects challenging unexamined assumptions about audience of the past. Putting reception studies into dialogue with feminist revisionist history or critical race theory, these scholars have explored matters of identity politics among groups underrepresented in standard film histories, resulting in important conclusions about female audiences, film spectatorship of the silent era, and the possible response range of female subjects. The responses of silent-era male audiences, however, or even sufficient theorization that men were capable of a similarly diverse range of responses as women, remain largely unrecorded and unexamined. This may be the result of some lingering presuppositions about the homogeneity of masculinity: that all men, as representatives of patriarchy and equal in their degree of privilege and oppressiveness, think and act the same; that the "preferred reading," dominant interpretation, or encoded message that reinscribes hegemony is always already the male viewpoint; that men are only capable of objectifying women onscreen, of wielding a reductive male gaze that either sexualizes or dismisses women; that maleness is a monolith.

While this is not to suggest that giving voice to under-represented or marginalized voices is not a vital historical project, it is to point out the risk of losing any social, political, cultural, or historical insight into men of the past by failing to acknowledge that they, too, represent a heterogeneous audience diverse in its response to and use of media texts. J.R. Macnamara points out the acknowledgement by numerous scholars that masculinities remain under-theorized due to the assumption "inherent in many public discourses that allegedly dominant or pre-eminent

groups do not have issues worthy of consideration” (17). Calling attention to differentiations between different “constituencies” of male audiences (black, gay, “mainstream,” etc.), Erb emphasizes the need for the researcher to “avoid reductive representations of these groups, for each has internally produced a variety of possible readings” determined by context (160).

There is, of course, evidence of male reception of Bara as a sex symbol from the 1910s. A 1916 song titled “Theda Bara, I’ll Keep Away from You,” written by Frank Henri Klickmann and Jack Frost and recorded by the duo of Henry Burr and Albert Campbell for Pathé (Gracyk), parodied a man obsessed with Bara, with the opening line, “I’ve just learned why many men leave home,” and the chorus, “Theda Bara, Theda Bara, why do you haunt me so” (Klickmann). However, most of the assertions that male audiences found Bara an erotic object and little else, such as Frank Thompson’s contention that “most of the male reviewers (of *Cleopatra*) were quite taken with Bara’s minimal wardrobe” (77), have been determined retrospectively and with little supporting evidence on offer. Writing in the mid-1960s, Knight and Alpert claimed that Fox publicists Al Selig and Johnny Goldfrap had “assumed—apparently with some reason—that American men were nothing if not naïve” (135). Positioning Bara as a refreshingly brazen representation of femininity against a backdrop of “cloyingly pure, eternally virginal Mary Pickfords, Lillian Gishes and Mae Marshes,” Knight and Alpert reinscribe the “Madonna/whore” binary in explaining that American men of the time, “taught to protect Sis and worship Mom,” were incapable of thinking outside of a pervasive “double standard of womanhood,” in which both the “nice girl” and the “knowing ‘woman of the world’” were imagined in terms “somewhat larger than life” (135).

Conceiving of the world in binaries may indeed be a hallmark of a “simpler” time, but determining that men of the past were *only* able to see women as one of two “larger than life”

archetypes reduces the complex issues of gender relationships, gender performance, and gender identity in the past to an oversimplified cliché that fails to explain these matters in any meaningful way. As Jackie Stacey acknowledges, the vamp and the femme fatale are figures of ambivalence for feminist film theorists: “Is the femme fatale a stereotype which justifies patriarchal control over the strong sexual woman, or does she offer female spectators pleasure in seeing women who are deadly, but sexy, exciting and strong?” (154). Granting male spectators the same ability to read mediated images of strong, powerful women on multiple levels simultaneously, or the ability or even desire to read misogynist images against the grain, opens the possibility that male responses might go beyond sexism, hatred, fear, objectification, or masochism to thinking about women in other ways.

Nostalgia, too, and scornful notions of “Grandpa” getting his engine revved up by Theda Bara, tends to smooth away much of the complexity of male response to Bara. By addressing the question of what possible meanings Bara might have had for male audiences of the pre-World War I period, I have discovered in extant publicity a variety of unanticipated reactions that indicate not only that a sexualized or objectifying response was far from the only kind, but also that male spectators were fully capable of translating the semiotic excesses of Bara’s image into idiosyncratic readings that roundly negate assertions that audiences believed Fox’s publicity to be true. Evidence of this kind helps to complicate overly simplified perceptions of the historical male audience.

By way of setting up the contrast between the overly simplified assumptions and the more nuanced responses by historical audiences, an overview of humorist and screenwriter S.J. Perelman’s 1952 “Cloudland Revisited” feature for *The New Yorker* illustrates the tendency to retrospectively reduce male reception of Bara to a joke. Perelman’s essay tells of the impression

Bara and *A Fool There Was* made on him when he was in sixth grade, and his reaction after seeing the film again at the Museum of Modern Art almost forty years later. Upon rewatching the film, Perelman wrote that he had “managed to glean a fairly comprehensive idea of what used to accelerate the juices in 1915” (34), but can only offer a facetious personal anecdote as corroboration. While being kept after school one day, Perelman wrote, he overheard two teachers talking about the illicit thrill of Bara’s performance in *A Fool There Was*, and that after fulfilling a raging compulsion to see the film himself, he became smitten with the vamp:

For a full month afterward, I gave myself up to fantasies in which I lay with my head pillowed in the seductress’s lap, intoxicated by coal-black eyes smoldering with belladonna. At her bidding, I eschewed family, a social position, my brilliant career... to follow her to the ends of the earth. I saw myself, oblivious of everything but the nectar of her lips, being cashiered for cheating at cards... descending to drugs, and ultimately winding up as a beachcomber in the South Seas.... (34)

Perelman’s recollection, while witty, reads a bit too much like the plot of *A Fool There Was* or other Bara films to really have the ring of unrevised self-revealing truth about his reception as a preteen. Even so, implications of sexual desire felt towards Bara are evident. Chaste as his words are to a current day sensibility, this is still far more candid than what could have been printed in the 1910s. Although the divide between what was privately felt and publicly sayable would not have stopped men from finding Bara sexually desirable, the injunction against that desire entering commonplace discourse could have prevented Bara from being reduced to nothing more than a sex symbol, with public discourse taking up additional aspects of her image. This is evident even in Perelman’s essay. After watching the film again, and after making fun of its heavy-handed melodramatics, stilted plot, mannered acting, and static pacing, he nonetheless



concludes, “For all its bathos and musty histrionics, ‘A Fool There Was,’ I am convinced, still retains some mysterious moral satchet” (36).

In her analysis of the film, Staiger presents a more considered examination of the moral messages conveyed by *A Fool There Was*. Referring to it as an example of the “fallen man genre,” she argues that the film “needs to be understood as providing a range of discourses” that could lead audiences “to talk about the new ideas of sexual passion, men’s frailty in relation to that sexuality, women’s potential power, and women’s continued negotiation of their identities in relation to the men to whom they were attached” (*Bad* 161). In particular, Staiger regards the film as conveying the idea that “the vampire’s victims seem more to be blamed than she,” and as such the film provided a “needed examination” of “Men’s responses to the lure of sexual opportunities in this age of erotic possibilities” (*Bad* 148).

Staiger’s interpretation is not merely a matter of feminist historical revisionism, but is remarkably similar, if actually more restrained, than the assessment of the film by poet, author, and editor Charles Hanson Towne in a 1936 retrospection on watching Bara’s films in his youth. In much the same way that press stories of the 1910s would frequently feature Bara fulminating on the hypocrisy of the double standard by which women were vilified for far lesser infractions than men, Towne surmised that audiences in actuality did not regard Bara as evil. “Only the men who sought her side in such unbelievable numbers were evil,” he wrote, saying that it was men “who had lured her to her doom,” rather than the other way around. “She was no weaker than any of us sitting out there in the dark auditorium,” Towne declared. No more resistant to nostalgia than other writers, Towne seemed to see Bara’s formerly shocking characterizations as a counteragent to the more cynical, worldly depictions of love in current day media. Addressing Bara, he wrote, “We need you, in a world of debased false romance, for you were more real to us

than any breathing woman who might be sitting by our sides. You were as necessary to us as the very elements, and none can ever take your place” (Towne).

Such rapturous estimations of Bara’s “necessity” were rare, however, and a number of press stories from the 1910s suggest that men often took a more pragmatic approach in their fandom, evaluating Bara in comparison to the everyday realities of their own marriages, while also expressing disbelief about the existence of vamps outside the confines of the movie screen. For instance, in the syndicated column purportedly written by Mary Pickford, America’s Sweetheart related a conversation she had overheard while attending a screening of Bara’s latest film. Pickford wrote that she recognized the heavily veiled woman sitting in front of her as Bara herself, and much to the amusement of both stars, two men seated nearby, oblivious to their famous neighbors, began discussing Bara’s merits. As one of the men settled into the seat next to her, Pickford heard him tell his companion ““Well, now we’re in for some fun.... If there is one actress I enjoy better than any other it is Theda Bara—she’s certainly got even my wife beat for disposition.”” When his friend expresses the opinion that Bara must be as wicked offscreen as her characters, the first man responds ““I’ll wager fifty cents that off the screen she’s as tame as an old hearth cat.... Yes, they’re always disappointing, these vampires are, when you meet ‘em. The fact of it is they never seem to camp anywhere except in the parts they’re playing,<sup>26</sup> and I guess it’s a lucky thing for us they don’t bowl us over in life the way their pictures do”” (Pickford).

The men’s exchange as reported in Pickford’s column is not unusual, as a number of sources suggest that Bara’s image initiated discourse on the rapidly changing social conventions surrounding love, romance, companionate marriage, gender relations, women’s roles, and morality. One of the most intriguing and informative artifacts providing insight into men’s

response to Bara's image appeared in 1915, when the *Louisville Herald* asked readers if they would marry Theda Bara. In soliciting responses, the paper asked its readers to consider whether the devious and destructive femme fatale of the movies was Bara's true self:

Can a woman, who is gentle of disposition and mild of temperament portray the villainous parts pictured by Miss Bara? Can a woman play a part without feeling it? And feeling it, can she be aught but a part of the woman? Would men willing become victims of the charms she portrays, if given the opportunity? Would the possessor of these eyes and lips be a helpmate or a hindrance? ("Here Is")

This matter, the paper reported, was a discussion into which "men and women have entered eagerly," and offered two tickets to Bara's *Carmen* for each response "considered worthy of reproduction." The *Herald* printed the responses in late October, and the fact that a number of



**Figure 1.13:** Publicity materials encouraged audiences to ponder differences between Bara's character onscreen and offscreen. *Cleveland Leader*, January 31, 1916 (page number cut off). Theda Bara scrapbook, vol. 1. Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the respondents made it clear in their letters that they were women, provides an intriguing subject for analysis on its own. Of the respondents not revealing themselves to be women, many indicated their awareness that Bara was an actress, and that she only portrayed a character. "I think that she, being a born actress, merely feels the part she is playing," wrote one respondent, identified only by the initials "L.F.", concluding, "her wonderful portrayal of the 'Vampire Woman' is really no indication of the part she would play in real life" ("Theda Bara Different") (Figure 1.13). "Acting is her profession, but she need not be the same off the stage as on it. It is doubtful she is," wrote J.N., but still seemed to indicate that *any* woman

could exert a hypnotic vampire hold over a man: “A man might be fascinated by the stage charms of any woman, and become a dupe to them, but if Theda Bara, or any other woman, found the natural disposition of a man to be congenial, she would not allow him to become a victim of her profession as a vampire, but would benefit him by her true character” (“Theda Bara, ‘Vampire’”).

Although most readers indicated that they knew Bara was an actress and only playing a role as a vamp, a few were nonetheless dubious about her marriageability. F.S. reasoned that the actress “must really feel for a time at least the part she plays and train her mind to that effect,” and expressed apprehension that the “wicked scenes” portrayed by her onscreen may lie dormant and “unknowingly, they may at some future time crop out in reality.” Because of this, F.S. found the proposition just too risky: “By exerting great will power she may be a lady at all times, but a conflicting train of thoughts is bound to affect her more or less. Men, if given the opportunity, would willingly succumb to her charms and become infatuated beyond hope. With her eyes and lips she would be a helpmate as long as she had her way, but woe to her husband if once he aroused he animosity” (“Theda Bara, ‘Vampire’”). Similarly, M.H. wrote that Bara must have traits of the vamp, “even if it only comes to the surface in acting,” contending, “if all the villainous parts she portrays were part of her nature, she would make you happy if she loved you” and admitting “There isn’t a man who would pass up the opportunity” to marry the star (“Theda Bara, ‘Vampire’”).

Significantly, other respondents saw Bara’s acting career supporting her marriageability. L.F. wrote that he would “feel no hesitancy in marrying her,” because her acting ability meant that “she could adapt herself to almost any part she would have to play, even to married life” (“Theda Bara Different”), while I.K. pronounced Bara “an ideal woman to marry” precisely

because she had “portrayed the sins and pitfalls that can befall woman, and their consequences,” making her “better able to avoid them” (“Theda Bara Different”). I.K. took this a step further in seeming to advocate independence and work outside the home for women as beneficial to marriage: “Being able to take care of herself and being a woman of the world, men should, if given the opportunity... be glad to love her, for she would make an excellent helpmate” (“Theda Bara Different”).

Considering the then-unprecedented frankness of many of Bara films regarding matters such as adultery, seduction, sexual obsession, sex outside of marriage, sex as separate from love, and sexuality as a form of power, there seems to be a conspicuous lack of any mention of sexuality in Fox’s publicity. Given the time period and prevailing attitudes about sexuality, though, it’s perhaps not really surprising that the publicity about Bara is so restrained concerning her erotic appeal or the intimacies of her private life. But Bara’s publicity does stand out from that of other celebrities of the time, in that it eschews romantic entanglements almost completely, with reports on her private life often focusing on things like her exhaustion from overwork and her good relationship with her family. Publicity, film roles, and constructed image may have equated Bara with “power, independence, and nonconformity,” Studlar suggests, “but only in the star’s expressed thoughts, in her personal style, or her professional choices—never in her private sexual behavior” (“Theda” 129). In fact, throughout her tenure with Fox, she appeared to be all but asexual in “real life,” with only a handful of mentions even suggesting she might have amorous interests, and never linked romantically to another Hollywood star.

A few press pieces, though, weren’t entirely circumspect in suggesting that Bara’s onscreen sensuality captivated some male fans. One of these, somewhat less fanciful than the 1915 story about a besotted admirer committing suicide over Bara,<sup>27</sup> shared excerpts from letters

supposedly written by male fans stirred to heights of desire by the actress. Not surprisingly considering the time period, these missives conveyed that desire in terms of romance and marriage rather than sexual intimacy, and expressed a sometimes surprisingly vulnerable longing for love. “Nothing less than an adding machine would be needed to enumerate the proposals of marriage which Theda Bara has received during her career” the article informed readers. One letter, reportedly “from a small mountain-bound town in Pennsylvania” but with a melodramatic flair that suggests a PR concoction, proclaimed “I dream always of your lustrous eyes. I love you and I will continue to love you when the stars are cold and the ocean has dried upon the face of the earth.” Another male fan, this one from Kansas, told the star “I am only 21 years of age, but I know we could live one happy life together,” adding, “I think you, dearest Theda, will admit so too” (“‘Vampire’ Receives”).

Bara was also often said to receive “interesting letters from convicts,” prompting her to remark “It seems the vampire type of woman has a strange fascination for really intellectual prisoners” (Bara, “Often”). Although this carries some suggestion that Bara’s wicked woman held special appeal for lawless men, qualifications were appended that assured audiences Bara’s convict fans were decent men who had temporarily strayed from the path of righteousness rather than hardened criminals, just as Bara was shown to be “good” in spite of her image and film roles. In one of the very few stories that intimated anything about the star’s private love life, Bara reportedly became so taken with one such “really intellectual prisoner” who had written her a “verse tribute” that “she has been pulling strings to secure his pardon.” She was so preoccupied by the “Real Life Romance” that “it was difficult to secure her attention in making her latest motion picture drama” (“Convict”). The story of Bara’s prisoner paramour, who reportedly had been on faculty at the University of Pennsylvania but had suffered a tragic downfall due to

alcoholism, reads like something out of a screenplay for one of her melodramas. Unlike in the movies, however, Bara was said to have helped rather than tormented the unfortunate man, demonstrating her high moral character by reinstituting his, encouraging him to resume his “proper place in society,” and to create a script for her based on his study of “ancient Babylonian hieroglyphics” (Bara, “Often”).

The last detail, which further links Bara to the ancient Near East, is probably a tip off that the whole scenario was a publicity gambit, but it also serves to situate Bara’s image in the context of several highly publicized archaeological expeditions to the “Bible lands” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the resulting widespread fascination with ancient cultures. Some of the most excessive, and therefore most captivating, memorable, and polysemic aspects of Fox’s campaign reflect this interest, coming across as fantasies created *by men, for men*—not simply as sexual fantasy, but as an evocation of the exciting drama and danger of the adventure, fantasy, horror, mystery, and early science fiction stories that became increasingly popular in dime novels and pulp magazines during the same period. Although such fiction did have a female readership, pulp magazines in particular “attracted a predominantly male following of adolescent boys and both blue- and white-collar men” (Kasson 167).

In a similar sense to Studlar’s contention that Orientalist spectacle in cinema was used to encourage consumerism in female audiences, the *1001 Nights* adventure tale Orientalism of Bara’s image draws upon tropes of fantastic fiction in a manner that seems devised to appeal to a presumably male interest. The image of Bara as the “Vampire Queen,” with all her dark foreign intrigue, fetishistic costuming, occult powers, past lives as notorious murderesses, allusions to the mysteries of ancient Egypt, and film roles in which she is frequently referred to as an “adventuress,” tied exotic ethnicity to these supposedly male interests. In a 1915 interview, for

instance, Bara divulged her memories of a former life in ancient Egypt, saying, “I remember crossing the Nile on barges to Karnak and Luxor as plainly as I recall crossing the Hudson on the ferry to-day to come to the studio at Fort Lee” (Bell, “Theda” 253). A press piece from 1916 told of Bara being given a 2000-year-old emerald ring with mystical powers by a 110-year old blind sheik, in exchange for the promise that if she had a male child, she would teach him to read Arabic and pray for the old man (Bara, “Many Odd”). Yet another piece told how “The coming of Theda Bara was prophesied by the ancient Egyptians!” Upon translation, hieroglyphics discovered on the wall of a tomb near Thebes were revealed to be a 2,500-year old inscription by Ramses, priest of Set, the dark god of storm and chaos, foretelling “the advent of the emotional actress who would lead men to destruction with her wiles.” “She shall seem a snake to most men,” the prophecy read. “She shall lead them to sin, and to their destruction. Yet she shall not be so. She shall be good and virtuous, and kind of heart, but she shall not seem so to most men.” The name of this misunderstood woman was only given as the Greek letter Theta (Courtlandt “The Divine” 59).

Although the exotic femme fatale had been a figure in art and literature for centuries, such colorful publicity often appeared to be strongly influenced by recent fantastic fiction. Genre-associated authors such as George MacDonald with *Lilith* (1895), Bram Stoker with *Lair of the White Worm* (1911), Hanns Heinz Ewers with *Alraune* (1911), Edgar Rice Burroughs with *A Princess of Mars* (published in book form 1912), and Sax Rohmer with *Brood of the Witch-Queen* (1918), among others, created powerful, exotic, sexually-enticing female characters, some virtuous, most villainous, who were active agents within the narratives. To be sure, all of these works can be regarded as nakedly misogynist in their equation of female sexuality with evil. The events of Arthur Machen’s particularly misogynistic horror novella “The Great God Pan” (1890;



revised 1894), for instance, revolves around a mysterious, irresistibly seductive, atavistic woman who entices men to such depravity that they commit suicide in regret and despair—quite similar to the plot of *A Fool There Was*.

To limit the assessment of these works and their appeal to male readers as purely misogynist, however, oversimplifies and diminishes their cultural resonance. This returns us to a frequent conundrum when evaluating representations of women or other marginalized identities in the media: even in works where a powerful, active female figure is “punished” by narrative’s end, does this entirely negate the unconventional, perhaps challenging, ideas generated by that character in the rest of the narrative? Further, if some male subjects identify with one or more marginalized groups, how might this affect their (presumptively) androcentric reading of the female character?

One of the most telling forerunners in fantastic fiction of Bara’s “Vampire Woman,” particularly in its Orientalist excess, is H. Rider Haggard’s *She: A History of Adventure* (1886, with subsequent novels in the series appearing in 1905, 1921, and 1923). The initial impact of *She* was “tremendous,” according to Margaret Atwood, who notes, “*Everyone* read it, especially men; a whole generation was influenced by it, and the generation after that” (112-13). The central figure of the series, the immortal sorceress-queen Ayesha, also known as “She-who-must-be-obeyed,” rules a lost city in the African interior, and is so astonishingly beautiful she inspires both desire and dread. Haggard’s unequivocally racist novels, however, make it clear to the reader that Ayesha, despite her location and her exoticism, is white—a device mirrored by the assurances in Bara’s early that she was of European descent.

Describing Ayesha as “a rebel at heart,” Atwood writes, “If only She hadn’t been hobbled by love, She would have used Her formidable energies to overthrow the civilized order. That the

civilized order was white and male and European goes without saying; thus She's power was not only female—of the heart, of the body—but barbaric, and 'dark'" (113). Bara, like Ayesha, represented a powerful, rebellious femininity threatening to social and moral stability. While seemingly held in check or undone entirely by those same forces at narrative's end, Bara's vamp, like Ayesha in the multiple *She* sequels, kept returning to disrupt the status quo. Atwood finds Ayesha to be "a supremely transgressive female who challenges male power." Undoubtedly the same could be said of Bara. Either despite or because of this, both were undeniably popular with male audiences.

*She* made appearances onscreen as early as 1899, when a one-minute Georges Méliès short titled *La Colonne de feu*, of a woman doing a serpentine dance, her veils hand-tinted to resemble flames, was retitled in English as *Haggard's She: The Pillar of Fire*. Actual adaptations came as early as 1908, with a seventeen-minute version from Edison, with subsequent versions in 1911, from Thanhouser; in 1916, from the British studio Barker; in 1917, and numerous others. The 1917 version is significant in that it was produced by Fox, but rather than casting Bara as Ayesha, the studio chose one of its other vamp actresses, Valeska Suratt. None of Suratt's films are known to be extant, but surviving promotional photos showing her in spider web gowns and headdresses, posed with skulls and coffins, in manacles, or with a cinched wasp waist that defies human anatomy, make her seem at least as bizarre and exotic as Bara, with whom she was frequently compared (Figure 1.14).<sup>28</sup>

That Fox's publicity emphasized the flamboyant adventure tale aspects of Bara's persona as much as her erotic allure was probably intended to broaden her appeal. It's possible that this kind of promotion extended interest in the star to boys, an audience that likely wouldn't have been interested in the fevered melodramas in which she typically appeared. As agent Alan Brock

recalled when he was trying to interest Bara in a stage comeback in 1954, “My childhood recollections of her sensational Fox Films were definitely negative,” adding, “All of us kids avoided movie vampires.” A humorous press story from 1917, however, told of a group of boys starting a baseball club in San Francisco who named themselves “The Vampire Nine,” with one member reporting, “Our president is a lady and her name is Theda Bara” (Wood). The joking tone of the article makes it unclear if the story was meant to be taken as fact, but does indicate that the incongruity of boys holding Bara in such esteem would have been seen as funny.



**Figure 1.14:** Valeska Suratt in 1916

Bara’s film roles were not typically seen as a laughing matter when it came to young audiences, though. One commentator recalled being a young boy and joining the queue at a Saturday matinee, only to be denied access to the theater by a policeman in the lobby because a Theda Bara film was being shown (Manski 53).

As this indicates, fantasy-adventure characteristics aside, the adult themes of many of Bara’s films would have remained the principal defining trait of her image for many moviegoers. As explored here, however, and complicating the belief that the primary response of male audiences to these adult themes was sexual arousal, surviving media indicates that they became a

forum for thinking about romantic relationships, marriage, and compatibility. There is some evidence, also, that Bara's star image may have been represented and received in ways that engaged with non-traditional gender performance. A press story appearing in August 1916 reported that Bara had been sent a pair of slippers, "as a small token of appreciation." The attached note read, "I have knitted these slippers myself for you. I have seen you many times in moving pictures. You're a dear." Bara sent a thank you, assuming the knitting fan was a young girl, and responding as such. In response, she received a note telling her "I'm not a little girl, but a big grown-up, man-size plumber."<sup>29</sup> And George Chauncey, Jr., examining records of the 1919 investigation by the Naval Training Station of Newport, Rhode Island into homosexual activity between its sailors and the local gay subculture, found that some of the "queens" were known exclusively by women's names they had adopted from female characters and performers in opera and movies, including Theda Bara (298). Although Bara's image would continue to generate reactions, progressive, reactionary, and everything in between, for decades to come, by 1919 her contract with Fox, her career in films, and her popularity as a star were all coming to an end.

### **Drawing the Curtain: World War I and Bara's Decline**

The dwindling of Bara's stardom not just coincided with, but as I argue, was accelerated by World War I, the cultural context of which strongly influenced audiences' reception of Bara in relation to both ethnicity and sex. The United States' entry into the First World War presented several opportunities for promotional exploitation of Bara, and in ways that tapped into previously unexplored uses of her image. These new promotions also reveal other aspects of male response to and reception of that image.

Bara had long been pushing Fox for a chance to expand her range beyond vamp roles, and the kind of formulaic, quickly churned-out films to which Bara was now being assigned could easily incorporate war themes as a background in which Bara's typical "adventuress" could be redeemed through sacrifice. Fox promoted the film *The Light* (Edwards, 1919) as a production that "will leave your audience with a feeling of the war's great influence for good" by showing how Bara's character, "the wickedest girl in Paris," is reformed by wartime service to become "an angel of mercy" (*The Light*).<sup>30</sup> In *When Men Desire* (Edwards, 1919), Bara played "an American girl caught in pre-World War I Germany who escapes during the war, having killed her German secret-service captor" (Parish 27).

Through promotion and public appearances, too, Bara's image was modified to better correspond to wartime concerns. Just days after the U.S. officially declared war on Germany, a Cleveland newspaper ran a story saying that Bara had been asked to autograph a regulation U.S. service flag and present it to a company of volunteers raised by Capt. Wilber Clarence Kraber of York, Pennsylvania, who said he was "an ardent admirer of the world's greatest actress." The autographed flag was to be carried by the soldiers "into the thick of the fray" ("Patriotic"). The familiarity and pleasurable associations provided by a favorite movie star, serving as a reminder of home, leisure, and enjoyment in a time of uncertainty and fear, may have been part of the reason that during the war it became "Quite the popular thing among the soldier boys to choose a 'godmother' for their regiment." Bara was chosen by the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry of Arizona as a mascot, and was reportedly extremely moved by the request. "When Miss Bara was received by 'her boys' last week," the article continued, "it was with the 'present arms' as she passed through their ranks, an honor that is generally reserved for the President and great generals" ("Theda Bara is Made 'Godmother'").

Fox also promoted Bara's success in soliciting bond purchases as a wartime effort. The press book for the film *The Light* (1919), referencing a Stage Women's Relief Fund Liberty Bonds drive held in New York, said that Bara "vamped her way successfully into the pocketbooks of 130 persons in less than two hours.... Begging, pleading, scolding had brought forth reasonable sales all day long; but vamping, as demonstrated by Miss Bara, brought the bills and pledges showering into the money boxes." At that event, Bara "netted Uncle Sam more than \$70,000," while at another Stage Women's Relief Fund drive, she sold \$300,000 in bonds (Golden 154).

Wartime displays of patriotism, public appearances at bond drives and other promotional events, and redemptive film roles provided an opportunity for Bara to show her "normalcy" as an American citizen, even though one columnist wrote that Bara was so "affected by the sufferings" of the war that "her 'oriental nature' has been greatly disturbed" (Gertrude). Although by this point Fox's publicity had for the most part dropped its convoluted stories about Bara's exotic ancestry, the normalization of Bara's image can also be read as a narrative of assimilation, in which she was sheared of the ethnically-flavored oddness that had made her intriguing only a few years earlier, prior to the war's dampening effect on America's cautious fascination with the exotic. Stripped of the supposed passion and expressivity that cultural commentators such as Yeziarska presented as characteristic of marginalized ethnicities in the United States, Bara's promotion foundered, and her star image began to lose its spark.

That Bara's supposed foreignness could have become a liability, while at the same time her box office appeal was impaired by the abatement of the exotic Orientalism that had made her intriguing to audiences, speaks to mainstream America's complex and inconsistent relationship to multiculturalism. The concurrent career declines of other ethnic-seeming femme fatale

actresses like Suratt (hailing from Terre Haute, Indiana) and Olga Petrova (born Muriel Harding in England), suggests that association with non-Anglo-Nordic ethnicities was a factor in the demise of the cinematic vamp. Considering, though, how quickly Bara and the others were replaced by new vampish stars of foreignness both faux, like Naldi (born Nonna Dooley in New York City) and real, like Polish-Slovak star Pola Negri, Polish-Lithuanian Dagmar Godowsky, and Hungarian Lya De Putti, reveals star discourse and audience response to be much more complicated than a selected set of cultural signifiers or even prevailing ideologies.

Numerous elements—industrial, technological, and economic, as well as cultural, social, and historical—influence audiences’ relation with stars. The comparatively brief Hollywood careers of these “second wave” vamps (even Negri, the most high-profile actress of the group) may indicate something about American response to ethnicity. Other factors, though, such as the formulaic nature of vamp roles; the heavy-handed promotion and one-dimensional star images of many actresses typecast as vamps; the specialized appeal of such stars; the generally briefer “shelf life” for female stars as compared to male; and the problem of accents with the advent of sound film, indicate that ethnicity, real or invented, was merely one component in a mix of conditions affecting moviegoers’ tastes and the reception of actresses typecast as vamps in the 1910s and 1920s.

With Bara, the war coincided with circumstances in the industry that hastened her rapid decline in popularity and commercial viability. The relationship between Bara and William Fox had soured considerably; when the studio felt it “had already milked the Bara image for all that it was worth” (Parish 28), it assigned her to a string of increasingly lackluster, low-budget melodramas until her contract expired. Fox was focusing on other contract players, such as cowboy star Tom Mix, “whose films were cheap to produce and yielded highly profitable

returns” (Parish 28). Additionally, the studio was grooming younger actress Betty Blythe, whose trim figure was more in line with changing standards of beauty, as their new vamp, starring her in *The Queen of Sheba* (Edwards, 1921), the kind of spectacular historical “super production” that would have seemed tailor-made for Bara a few years earlier.

All of these factors contributed to the decline of Bara’s popularity, but were perhaps secondary to the larger socio-historical context. It’s likely the double tragedies of the war and the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 had much to do with changes in audiences’ tastes and expectations, and a desire to break from mores and conventions of the past. The giddy excesses of Bara’s image, her publicity, and the vamp figure that had been a source of pleasure and intrigue a few years earlier were likely regarded as fatuous and juvenile after such unsparing turmoil and sorrow, just as the Victorian moralizing embedded within the vamp image came to be regarded as simplistically naïve and outdated even earlier. Practical realities connected with the war effort and the epidemic necessitated changing paradigms of gender roles and performance that also sped up the dissolution of the vamp’s spell. Even though Bara’s vamp was an active female figure fully capable of functioning in a man’s world, the taste for depictions of “women of leisure” who got what they wanted through sex rather than effort had waned—for a few years, at least.

For veterans in particular, the war may have rendered Bara’s image unappealing, whether it be from exposure to European culture and a less jejune, less allegorical conception of sexuality, or from the U.S. military’s scare-mongering anti-venereal disease propaganda, with its tactic of depicting sexually-active women as predatory carriers of disease. A pamphlet put out by the War Department for returning soldiers warned, “Most loose women have clap or syphilis. Many have both” (War Department 13). In addition, soldiers were cautioned that that *any* woman



could be a source of contamination: “A man who goes with any loose woman, no matter what she may say, or how she may look, runs the risk of getting clap or syphilis.... It is easy for a woman to hide her condition” (War Department 14). Sexual continence was linked to “clean, strong manhood,” just as imprudent sexual behavior was equated with self-destruction—not in the preposterously melodramatic symbolism of weak men succumbing to the vamp and her fatal allure, but in the graphic, medical realism of syphilis and gonorrhea wreaking havoc on the male body and the potential for venereal disease to be passed on and corrupt the family, the very bedrock of the American way of life the soldiers had fought so hard to protect.

These propagandistic warnings depended upon the reinforcement of the binary that polarizes good, “innocent” women and bad, “loose” women. Part of this dynamic was the message that the European women soldiers may encounter abroad were suspect, more likely to be “loose” because of their cultural differences, with the encouragement that soldiers resist sexual temptations and “save themselves” for marriage and the wholesome, chaste girls (and future mothers) of America. The association of venereal disease with the exotic, Bara-type vamp was made manifest in a wartime anti-V.D. propaganda poster designed by H. Dewitt Welsh (Figure 1.15). Pictured in a barren desert setting, grotesque allegorical figures representing the black plague, the “white plague” (tuberculosis), and yellow fever, clad in loose caftans and burnouses reminiscent of Bedouin garb, huddle at the feet of a standing woman, the avatar of venereal diseases, naked from the waist up, in a billowing cloak, appropriately colored scarlet. The figure pours blood from a goblet, and a manacle on her wrist connects her by chain to a vulture perched on a human skull, recalling the bizarre accoutrements used in publicity photos of vamp stars like Bara and Suratt. The overall effect is to suggest that the vamp, shown in her

natural habitat of Middle Eastern wastelands and amidst monsters, is synonymous with disease and corruption.



Figure 1.15

Animosity towards the Central Powers countries during the war appears to have devolved into a generalized post-war distrust of foreigners in general, and the 1920s saw a dramatic increase in hostility towards southern, central, and eastern European immigrants, exclusionary nativism, and restrictive policies. Negra writes that many Americans clung to an idealized vision of the American homeland in order to justify participation in the war, which led to the “vilification and repression of immigrant subcultures” as a means “of attempting to ‘fix’ American cultural identity in the sentimentalized form of national unity” (“Fictionalized” 182). Not surprisingly, the film industry “self-consciously structured” itself to reinforce nationalist

sentiment. A press release from December 19, 1920, quoting Frederick H. Eliott, executive secretary of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry, proclaims that the industry was joining the fight for “the winning of America for Americans” (“Fictionalized” 182). Bara’s formerly fascinating, unspecific, and mobile foreignness had become a distinct liability rather than a sales point. The sinister, serpentine seductress, redolent of the Old World and hell-bent on infiltrating and contaminating the best of American manhood by exploiting their sexual weaknesses was (temporarily) out; the thoroughly modern, thoroughly American flapper was waiting in the wings.

## **Conclusion**

Popular culture, mass media, and their reception are useful resources for rethinking the past, shedding light on those cracks in the dominant discourse in which alternative histories can be discovered. As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, interpretations of Bara’s image and popularity are complex and compelling in their variety, and certainly more complicated than many film historians have allowed. I have argued that histories and memories that recognize the past as heterogeneous rather than homogenous, and as a place of diverse reactions, interpretations, and opinions, make that past more “useable” by uncovering patterns and models for ways we might better understand our own socio-political context. By rethinking history and finding the cracks in the dominant discourse of the past, we are more attuned to recognize them in the present.

In assessing what constitutes “effective” history, Foucault regarded as essential a perspective that would shake rather than reaffirm a sense of the self, one that would introduce “discontinuity into our very being.” Conventionally, Foucault explained, people have wanted a

kind of history confirming that our present has been arrived at through “profound intentions and immutable necessities.” What he regarded as “the true historical sense,” however, performs a very different task, placing “our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference” (“Nietzsche” 361). Such a perspective, he wrote, “divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself,” and in so doing “deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature.... It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity” (“Nietzsche” 360).

While it is impossible to account for those “countless lost events,” this seems to be precisely Foucault’s point: not only can one never arrive at a “definite” when it comes to examining the past, but history demands acknowledgment that for every turn of circumstance, there are innumerable other possible turns, both actual and theoretical, some of which we may comprehend, others of which evade our reach of conception. Only the most naïve, or ideologically motivated, grasp of history can imagine the past as some grand narrative, rather than a clamor of voices, each with a story to tell, the overwhelming majority of which will ever remain unheard. The very impossibility of recapturing those stories and the people the stories represent, should not only serve to shake our sense of how we arrived at the present, who we are in our own time, and our chances of achieving any sort of posterity, but lift us out of a complacent presumption that we can know what people of the past truly felt, thought, or experienced. This is not only because, as Foucault maintains, perspectives and worldviews that were integral to how people of the past understood their circumstances were so fundamentally different that they defy our own parameters of comprehension, but also because, I would contend, that within those disconcertingly unfamiliar ways of being and knowing, there are also unexpected and perhaps undiscoverable commonalities.

Despite having only mere suggestions of how the ever-elusive historical subject may have responded to Bara, the complexity of reception appears to be not merely a matter of time allowing the ideology coded into Bara's image to expose itself, but something that existed from the initial moment of her stardom. The difficulty of recognizing or theorizing the reception of specific groups is affected not only by the passage of time. Audience analyses based on reception of how stars become, to repeat Dyer's words, "embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which we make our lives," must also beg the question of how legitimate the divisions of audiences by race, class, gender, and other factors are, and how well such classification can, in actuality, provide any kind of real insight into the subjective response. While it is undeniable that all individuals within a particular social construct are conditioned to respond and behave within certain parameters of acceptability, as dictated by a sense of self comprised of both imposed and selected markers of identity, it's also undeniable that every individual in a society identifies with multiple groups, enormously complicating reception. It is also vitally important to acknowledge that there is an interior life, knowable only to the subject him or herself, which has the potential to shape ideas, beliefs, and impressions very different from what would be anticipated by standard social and historical categories.

While rampant revisionism obfuscates what is known about Bara and her audience, the evasiveness of "truth" in this instance contributes to her image's polysemy. All of the inconsistencies, implausibilities, and semiotic excesses of the publicity through which historical audiences came to "know" and interpret the Bara image are also the factors that made her adaptable and useful to a diverse range of viewers. Not coincidentally, as we will see in the following chapters, they are also the factors that have kept the discourse surrounding her star

image viable over time—intriguing, excessive, contentious, and rich enough to be retained in cultural memory, and thereby available and open to a host of new readings and repurposings.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Ramsaye, “The Romantic History of the Motion Picture,” *Photoplay*, October 1924, 56.

<sup>2</sup> Deemed as such by Molly Haskell, interviewed in *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes*, dir. Hugh Munro Neely, Timeline Films, commercially unreleased DVD, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Rubin, crediting the concept to Jeffrey Weeks, defines moral panics as “the ‘political moment’ of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channeled into political action and from there into social change.” Moral panics, she argues, are aimed at “chimeras and signifiers,” events and conditions which do not in actuality exist: moral panics “draw on the pre-existing discursive structure which invents victims in order to justify treating ‘vices’ as crimes” (25).

<sup>4</sup> For example, a letter attributed to Bara directed at the mayor of her hometown reads in part, “Through the silent but expressive medium of the motion picture I am saving hundreds of girls from social degradation and wrong-doing. I believe I am showing time and again the unhappiness, the misery which fall to the lot of men and women transgressors and the contempt and hatred which such people inspire in the good society and among the well-behaved people of the world.” For good measure, Bara added, “Every mother, every minister, every person with the well-being of the younger elements of Cincinnati owe me some gratitude for what I have accomplished through these pictures” (“An Open Letter”).

<sup>5</sup> These possible ethnic types in Bara’s films are drawn from information in Eve Golden’s biography *Vamp*.

<sup>6</sup> As Miyao documents, changing socio-political conditions altered how American audiences responded to Hayakawa, and what kind of roles he would play in films. Miyao links Hayakawa’s popularity—or more precisely, the decision by the Famous Players-Lasky studio to promote him as a star—in part to Japan’s alliance with the United States and the Entente Powers in the First World War, as well as a widespread taste for Japonisme in home décor amongst bourgeois Americans. Increasing nativism and suspicion of Japan after World War I, changed this situation, with American attitudes shifting from regarding Japanese immigrants as assimilable and capable of being “Americanized,” to regarding them as un-assimilable and a threat to the American way of life. Intertitles on re-issued prints of *The Cheat* were thus changed to indicate that Hayakawa’s character was Burmese, not Japanese, as he had been before.

<sup>7</sup> To add a dash more spice to the story, in a number of old press accounts, Bara’s mother is said to have rescued her father after he became lost in the Egyptian Sahara. Among the later adjustments to the story, Bara’s parents were described as “a beautiful adventuress and a tubercular artist” (“Is This”).

<sup>8</sup> While some press stories reference Bara’s childhood in Egypt, in a 1916 piece she reports that she grew up in Italy (Bara, “Many Odd”).

<sup>9</sup> The tendency for later accounts describing the Bara publicity schemes to focus on the Arab dancing girl or princess mother, I would argue, is not only because it is more colorful, but also because it supports an agenda to portray audiences of the past as naïve and gullible.

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<sup>10</sup> Bara was also referred to as “the Ishmaelite of femininity” in Franklin, “Purgatory’s Ivory Angel” 70.

<sup>11</sup> Eighty years later, the American Film Institute’s online “seminars” on American film history, presented as part of Columbia University’s Fathom Knowledge Network Inc., don’t stray too far from Ramsaye’s account of Bara’s rise to stardom: “One ‘type’ created entirely by businessmen was the vamp, first embodied by Theda Bara. Born Theodosia Goodman in Cincinnati, Fox’s publicity department molded her into an Arab siren. By the time of her debut in 1915, movie mogul William Fox had sent out voluminous material detailing how her name was an anagram for ‘Arab Death’ and declaring that she shared an astrological sign with Cleopatra” (Botnick).

<sup>12</sup> There had been earlier observations about the anagrammatic aspect of the name, although oddly enough, not of Bara’s full name. As early as the 1915 Archie Bell article, it was already noted that “Bara” is “Arab” backwards, but Bell does not make reference to “Theda” being anagram of “death”—simply that it’s a diminutive of Theodosia (“Theda” 246). And, while a 1916 article makes reference to Bara’s “startling discovery” that her given name was an anagram of “death,” there is no mention of “Arab” being the secret behind “Bara” (“Behold”).

<sup>13</sup> The dubiousness of Fox’s version is compounded by his claim that the studio devised the name “Bara” by spelling “Arab” backwards. Although this coincidence was certainly exploited, Bara herself insisted that the name was derived from Baranger, the surname of her maternal grandfather.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Sklar, for instance, wrote in *Film: An International History of the Medium*, that Bara was promoted as the daughter of a sheik (72).

<sup>15</sup> The enduing appeal of Valentino, and greater familiarity with his films and image, may also have (unconsciously) influenced the revisionist remembrance of Bara, as reflected by an obituary reporting that her publicity promoted her as the daughter of an Arab sheik and a French woman (“Theda Bara Dies”).

<sup>16</sup> For instance, the Reverend Wilbur Fisk Crafts, director of the censorship entity the International Reform Bureau, lobbied for years to win legislation that would “rescue the motion picture from the hands of the devil and 500 un-Christian Jews” (Knight and Alpert 177).

<sup>17</sup> Both of Bara’s parents had been immigrants: her father, Bernard Goodman, was Polish and/or Russian, and worked as a tailor; her mother, Pauline deCoppet, was French-German, born in Switzerland, and worked as a wigmaker. As late as 1920, when promotion of Bara seemed to revolve around negating Fox’s publicity and revealing the “truth” about Theodosia Goodman of Cincinnati, her mother was still said to be French, and her father half Italian, half Russian (Mullet 34).

<sup>18</sup> Whether “Goodman” would have been a recognizably Jewish name to most Americans is less important in this case than its familiarity to Jewish audiences. However, publicity reports from 1917 that Bara’s parents and siblings had their surnames legally changed from “Goodman” to “Bara” may have been, according to Studlar, “an attempt to repress public perception” that Bara’s parents were “Jewish émigrés” (“Theda” 133).

<sup>19</sup> As an aside obviously meant to further expose Bara as a fraud, the interviewer goes on to tell a story in which booking agent Chamberlain Brown, upon being introduced to Bara in a theatre, recognized her as Theodosia Goodman, and reminded her that she had once come to him about a job. According to the story, Bara “frostily” replied that prior to her film appearances, she had never been on the stage in America (Evans, D. 107).

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<sup>20</sup> The source of this article is microfilm in the collection of the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. The date information is hand-written, and the year of the article could either be 1934 or 1954. Although the digit looks slightly more like a “3,” the fact that the article includes a photograph of a middle-aged Bara that has actually been dated to 1955 in some sources (such as Norman Zierold’s *Sex Goddesses of the Silent Screen*), 1954 seemed more likely.

<sup>21</sup> Having noted this, it’s also important to point out that Dyer reminds us that not all contradictions signal the possibility of progressive change, and indeed star images also “variously seek to ‘manage’ or resolve” the contradictions “within and between ideologies” (*Stars*, 34). Mayne fairly critiques the general idea by commenting that contradiction does not always equate subversion (127). I would also add that contradictions and ambiguities within a star image may or may not even be recognized by a media consumer.

<sup>22</sup> Dyer specifically mentions adolescent, female, and gay audiences as among those who might find special significance in their attachment to certain stars. He further attaches significance that “in the discussion of ‘subversive’ star images...stars embodying adolescent, female, and gay images play a crucial role” (*Stars*, 32).

<sup>23</sup> Yeziarska herself was briefly under contract with Goldwyn as a screenwriter, but rankled at being publicized as a fulfillment of the American Dream.

<sup>24</sup> An example from the recent documentary *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* (Kempner, 2009) illustrates how one ethnic-type in the media might be “readable” to other ethnic groups as a proxy representation. In the documentary, a Greek-American interviewee said she responded and related to the character of Molly Goldberg, a matronly eastern-European Jewish-American, because the ethnic component of actress Gertrude Berg’s performance seemed so familiar, commenting that as a child the cross worn by her Greek immigrant grandmother seemed to be her only major difference from Mrs. Goldberg.

<sup>25</sup> Critics and columnists, in fact, could be downright cruel in assessing Bara’s physical allure, and the flesh-baring costuming of *Cleopatra* evoked some especially biting commentary, with a writer for the *Brooklyn Eagle* jeering, “She could never tempt a man to be late for dinner, much less to give up the throne of Rome” (qtd. McPherson). One columnist who routinely insulted her wrote a piece that took the form of a letter to Bara and scathingly critiqued her body in the film: “It struck me that you were looking unusually husky: I thought I perceived a vagrant ripple of surplus flesh here and there. Flash! An idea! Why not write a story about Miss Bara paying for her screen sins in added weight? Purging her soul with annoying avoirdupois?” (Williams, J.).

<sup>26</sup> While camp, designating an ironic reading that suggests the irreverence with which gay men observe and critique “mainstream” culture, and “camping,” signifying the a satirical performance of that culture through exaggerated imitation of it, certainly apply to Bara and the flamboyant theatricality of her image, I don’t believe this is the intended meaning here. According to the Oxford English Dictionary online (accessed 25 July 2010), the first usage of “camp” in that sense was noted by J. Redding Ware in *Passing English of the Victorian Era* in 1909, which reported the term was “Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character.” The next cited usage of the term in the OED is not until 1931. While it is possible that this use of the word “camp” may have “gone mainstream” by 1916, it is also likely that it would have still carried associations that would have prevented it from being used in a syndicated newspaper column—and one written by Mary Pickford at that. Here, I think the use of the verb “to camp” signifies something more along the lines of “to situate oneself,” and its usage is coincidental.



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<sup>27</sup> After being spurned by Bara, reads the story, her heartbroken admirer snatched a snake-shaped bracelet worn by the star and gulped down poison that had been concealed in a secret reservoir (Greeley-Smith 9).

<sup>28</sup> In fact, the April 1916 issue of *Photoplay*, in reference to Bara's new film *The Serpent*, even asked "Is Bara deliberately or unconsciously imitating Valeska Surratt (sic)?" ("Fox's most notable Theda Bara picture"). Surratt, a vaudeville performer who also appeared on Broadway (most notoriously in *The Girl with the Whooping Cough*, forcibly closed by New York's mayor in 1910 for indecency) made eleven now-lost films with Fox. She has been described as "the most adventurous explorer of feminine visual personae on stage or screen." (Shields, D.).

<sup>29</sup> "Theda Bara has received" (caption). *Sentinel* (rest of name cut off). 3 August, 1916. No page number. Theda Bara scrapbook, vol. 1. Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

<sup>30</sup> In providing information for exhibitors, Fox's publicity department apparently realized that audiences wanted escape from the war rather than to revisit it in a war-themed film, and tried to promote *The Light* as uplifting rather than depressing, "the kind of photoplay that men and women everywhere will love to see in the days of peace." The press book continued, "We know that today the world no longer thrills at the horrors of the trenches. It wants to forget those days of sorrow. In 'The Light' William Fox has not sought to bring back reminiscences of the tragic period of starvation, weary marches and death, which have become the world's nightmare. There are no battle scenes in this super-production. It is a play of hope and regeneration."

## Chapter Two

### **“Who Does She Think She Is, Theda Bara?” Parody, Intertextuality, and Revisionist Memory**

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*“It was nice of you to come to see me,” she said, extending a welcoming hand. “I am ‘the forgotten woman’ now, you know.”*

*“Nonsense!” I exclaimed, with an abruptness that I fear was not very polite. “Your public will always remember you.”*

*“Perhaps you’re right,” she laughed, “but how will it remember me?”*

—Theda Bara, interviewed by Frederick L. Collins<sup>1</sup>

As the 1933 article that provides this chapter with its epigraph indicates, Theda Bara, whom interviewer Frederick L. Collins presents as a good-humored, plump but attractive, contented but vibrant matron, was aware of and seemingly resigned to being remembered, if at all, only in limited terms. It’s not difficult to imagine why in the early 1930s she would have anticipated this as her legacy. In the decade after her film career had foundered, Bara was being represented primarily as an oddity of the past, a now rather embarrassing has-been whose presence in the media was generally confined to “whatever happened to?” stories and the object of jests and parody.

After her association with Fox Film Corporation had ended in 1919, Bara made a few comeback attempts in the 1920s. These attempts, which parodied—sometimes inadvertently—her vamp image, had an overall unfortunate effect on her career and any chance of being taken seriously as an actress. In 1920, she took the leading role in a notoriously bad play, *The Blue Flame*, which although financially successful was the kind of production, if critics such as the *New York Times*’ Alexander Woollcott are to be believed, that Broadway audiences attended largely for its unintentional humor. In 1925 she starred in her final feature film, *The Unchastened*

*Woman* (Young). Produced by Chadwick Picture Corporation, a “small but respectable Poverty Row outfit,”<sup>2</sup> the film’s send-up of the vamp image did little to revive Bara’s career. The following year, she was incongruously featured in the Hal Roach comedy short *Madame Mystery* (Wallace and Laurel), playing the title character, a soigné secret agent (Figure 2.1). Although Bara made much in the press over comedy’s greater demands on acting ability than vamp roles, her comeback effort was also painted as misguided, even pathetic. “Shed a bitter tear o’er the fall of the mighty,” the



**Figure 2.1:** Bara in character as Madame Mystery

*Washington Post* sardonically instructed readers, quipping, “To think that one so young and fair should hearken to the call of comedy!” (Lad).

Although *Madame Mystery* and, to a lesser extent, *The Unchastened Woman* were intended as parody, they further reinforced the association between Bara and the man-eating vamp, a passé image that was out of step with a more sexually sophisticated Jazz Age America. The unyielding bond between the star and the vamp that marked Bara as a has-been held her image in stasis throughout the 1920s, diminishing both her cultural relevance and the use value of her star persona to audiences. Continuing audience interest in the sexual “outlaw” aspect of the femme fatale, however, has also been the principal security maintaining Bara’s purchase in cultural memory. Considering the adaptability of Bara’s vamp image to new uses, the passage of time has shown this association to be more akin to a set of wings than an anchor.

By the time of Collins's 1933 interview, a combination of critical distance and nostalgia had already begun to induce modifications to the way Bara was being remembered and represented in the media. The ostensibly dominant interpretations of her image had modulated from moral panic and/or illicit thrill to seeing her as an antiquated figure ripe for parody—as a type representative of both the glamour and the foibles of early Hollywood; as a symbol of the sexual naïveté of the past; as a point of contrast to more “modernized” views on women; and perhaps even as a signifier of a kind of subcultural resistance to mainstream culture and politics. That variations of all of these interpretations, and countless others, have existed simultaneously exemplifies the palimpsestic quality of Bara's star image. Parody, which by its very nature requires the ability to read a text on multi-levels, expands that palimpsestic aspect even further, extending the polysemy of Bara's image and the opportunity for it to be adapted for new meanings and uses.

In this chapter I conduct an analytical survey of how parody has affected the adaptability, use value, signification, and memorability of Bara's image over time. That image's reappearance in numerous instances, in highly disparate variations, and in various media over almost a century demonstrates how popular culture might withstand cultural and political changes—and might even flourish *because* of those changes. As the recurrences of her image indicate, Bara has served some purpose, and determining what that purpose might have been in varying contexts is the pivotal point of inquiry. To use Mike Budd's words, Bara's image has not ossified into “a stable, unitary text,” but rather has become a multiplicity of *images*, extracted from recurring media representations. In this way, Bara becomes a “series of historical moments” consisting of the “multiple occasions, functions, and contexts of reception” over a course of decades (Budd 7).

The ways in which Bara's star images have been rearticulated and re-presented through parody and burlesque act as a record of such "historical moments."

My goals for this chapter include gauging the possible socio-political impact of Bara's images within increasingly complex modes of transmitting, receiving, and remembering that image. Further, I investigate how the reworking and repurposing of her image shape reception, and consequently what is at stake in terms of media consumers' capacity to intervene in the discourse by which popular cultural images and representations are understood, made use of, and remembered, at both an individual and a cultural level. By charting the nature and conditions of various modifications and interventions through parody, I explore how the shifting intersections of memory, intertextuality, reception, and new cultural productions spanning from the 1910s to the present reveal that Bara's image, not merely subsisting within changing cultural forums, was adapted to reflect the cultural climate.

More importantly, however, I contend that rather than just *reflecting* socio-cultural changes, both media and audiences' acts of repurposing Bara's image have anticipated social changes and exerted a degree of influence on reshaping political realities, including those concerned with sexuality and gender. I argue that parody has been an especially effective means of prompting such change, both by preserving Bara in cultural memory, and by reframing and reworking her image's meanings. Parody in this sense facilitates applications of Bara's star image that seem otherwise unexpected or unsupported within the image's original horizon of expectations. In part, this is because parody's frequently humorous mode of representation makes introducing controversial or challenging ways of thinking about sex and gender into discourse less threatening and more acceptable to a wider public.

The case studies in this chapter give insight into the social and cultural conditions that have presented opportunities for Bara's image to be remembered, parodied, repurposed, or recommodified, and fall into two broad categories. The first are mass media parodies modifying Bara's image in ways that have kept it commercially viable through connections to other temporal and cultural contexts, and that expand her image by linking it to other female stars: Mae West in the 1930s; Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s; and Cher in the 1970s. While these cases involve some exertion of agency on the part of these stars, they are better understood as commercially produced artifacts reinforcing the dominant discourse surrounding Bara. As texts generated by the mass media, they are polysemic, as are all texts, but not "reliably" indicative of the readings and uses of her image outside commercial interests. They also demonstrate a recurring systematic manipulation of Bara's image, in which she is portrayed as an outmoded, overblown, even ridiculous embodiment of sexuality, rendering the eroticism (and to a lesser extent, the Orientalist exoticism) of her image a source of derisive laughter. At worst, these artifacts can appear misogynist, and even at best they communicate a mixed message. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, ambiguities and contradictions in media texts can motivate idiosyncratic readings. In one sense, such patterns of representation have threatened to reduce women's sexuality in general to a joke. Regarded in another way, however, at least some such historical artifacts can be read as an indictment against rigid social demands on how female sexuality is to be represented and performed, and some actually appear to be mocking chauvinistic male fantasies and expectations.

The more recent cases in the second unit of consideration have been informed and influenced by decades' worth of preceding texts, which retained Bara in memory and demonstrated how her image could be expanded and repurposed. One of the major distinctions

from the earlier texts is that these later variations have been created as more individualized, less commercially motivated works, including ones that may be considered amateur. Without relying on an artificial binary between “top-down” and “bottom-up” influences on culture, the more personal reactions to Bara’s image evident in these works can be seen nonetheless as a way of questioning the dominant discourse surrounding Bara’s image, and expanding the interpretations and applications of her image. In these artifacts, Bara’s image is amplified, contemporized, and re-presented as more than a one-note stereotype, engaging with the intertextuality of star image to support new uses. The analysis here focuses on the 1992 off-Broadway musical *Theda Bara and the Frontier Rabbi*; *Theda*, a 2007 piece by British artist Georgina Starr; and *Edendale Follies*, a 2007 film project by “at risk” youth working with the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles. All of these locate a creative catalyst in earlier texts and the memory-information they provide by reflecting on both Bara’s historical reception and on the psychological conflict between Theodosia Goodman and her ambivalence toward her alter ego.

Although I am looking specifically at how parody has repurposed Bara’s image in different contexts, in a broader sense I make the case that parody is a method of repurposing the past in general, and that it provides access to useable aspects of the past in especially efficacious ways. As a record of how a particular point of view in a particular historical context made sense of its present moment, and/or its past, parody captures information about a time and place that might not otherwise be recorded. It may incorporate counter-hegemonic discourse or traces of marginalized viewpoints, or it may simply convey reactions and feelings otherwise lost to time; in any case, parody can preserve hidden or harder to access material about the past, serving as an alternative historical record. It can thus instigate different ways of thinking about socio-political circumstances, not only in its context of origin, but also for future audiences. By conveying the

differing ways individuals understood and critiqued their time and culture, parody can challenge present-day expectations about how people thought and acted in the past by revealing unanticipated perspectives.

Because it draws on that which already exists, whether from the recent or distant past, and requires knowledge and recollection of referents within an intertextual network, parody is always a process of adding additional layers of meaning, including materials from and about the past. If parody can thus guide audiences to regard star images, character types, and other popular cultural texts as composites of “historical moments,” it may also heighten the perception of the past as a composite of information, narratives, and perspectives, some of which are in conflict, and some of which contradict received knowledge. In this way cultural memory, like media texts, is imbued with a multiplicity of meanings, and history is more clearly perceived as an in-process, contestable, polysemic story to which many authors can contribute and intervene.

In what follows, I lay out the theoretical framework for my case studies. First, I look at the relationship of intertextuality to parody, examining how their interplay expands a given work’s capacity for meaning, and sets up conditions conducive to further acts of repurposing. Investigating the theory that parody is actually a form of intertextuality, I next address the politics of representation as they play out in parody, and how the transversal of historical contexts has affected ways of knowing and remembering Bara, and how her image has been reinterpreted and reused. Having set the theoretical groundwork for understanding how and why parodies of Bara work as mnemonic devices, cultural commentary, and inspiration for new repurposings of her image, I explore the specifics of such matters in an analytical survey of Bara parodies from the 1910s to the present.



## **Parody and Intertextuality**

Understanding the cultural impact of parodies of Bara involves analysis of the ways intertextuality, memory, and affect intersect, and of the ways each are modified by differing contexts. Central to this investigation is the fact that, in spite of the loss of virtually all of her film work, generations of audiences' knowledge of and interest in Bara have resulted from the extensive intertextual network of re-presentations and appropriations that emanates from her image. All star images, of course, are complex and contingent sets of meaning resulting from intertextuality, but as arguably the most culturally significant Hollywood film star with the smallest surviving film record, intertextuality plays a (perhaps uniquely) vital role in Bara's meanings and memorability. This is important not only because countless intertextual referents have extended the signifying career of her image long after it could no longer be sustained by her films, but have done so in a way that could not be supported by her films alone, increasing the open-endedness and polysemy of her image. Moreover Cynthia Erb, in noting the "potentially infinite" factors a reception scholar faces in attempting to contextualize a particular work, sees intertextuality as a method that has "furnished a reasonably manageable means" of tracing the history of a work's reception (7). This is especially applicable in regarding Bara's image diachronically, in light of what the changing tactics of parody tell us about how and why Bara's image has been repurposed.

Ways of knowing about Bara are a complex epistemological intersection of the "technologies" of intertextuality, history, memory, and emotion. Linda Hutcheon's observation that we can only know the past through "a contingent and inescapably intertextual history" (109) supports my contention that the always in-process configurations of meaning resulting from intertextuality are analogous not only to the inevitably subjective writing of history, but to the

individual, interior processes of memory. Thus, in a case like the parodic recycling of Bara's image, I regard intertextual artifacts as a kind of embodied memory, with the chain of associations on which parody depends corresponding to the associative processes of memory. In a related concept, Simon Dentith asserts that parody "has the paradoxical effect of preserving the very text that it seeks to destroy" (36). While his wording seems unduly extreme, I agree that parody puts not only itself *and* the precursor text it has failed to "destroy" into discourse, *but also* a host of other texts caught in its web of allusions. In this sense, both the remembrance and meaning of Bara is tied to recurrences in a network of referents, and amplified by the sheer number of those referents.

Remembrance, however, is a condition of the subjective encounter with elements in that network. Therefore Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's concept of "textual shifters" better indicates the conditions that keep the meaning and utility of Bara's image in play over time, and adaptable to differing purposes. The term refers to the myriad factors and circumstances that determine the relationship between a text and reader. According to Bennett and Woollacott, neither texts *nor readers* are ever fixed, finished entities. Using James Bond as their case study, they contend that much of the character's "signifying currency" is determined by constantly changing relations between various texts and changing historical contexts (45). Because no text is impermeable, "extra-textual" influences are always infiltrating and "reorganizing" the "intra-textual" (263). Bond, in this sense, is "made," again and again, by the intersections of novels, films, promotion, merchandise, star publicity, and other popular cultural forums as they circulate, meet up, and separate within specific times and places, received in varying permutations by individual subjects. Because of the unlimited configurations these shifting intertextual

associations generate, all texts are always in process, with potentially limitless meanings and applications.

Engaging with the concept of textual shifters lets us see the various media artifacts under discussion less as nodes within an intertextual network, or as the interpretations of readers, than as indicators of the perpetual, triangulated exchange between text, reader, and context, with the idea that all three points are influenced by the others. Additionally, I contend memory is a component of all three points within this exchange, and intrinsic to the system of reciprocal modifications on which meaning is formulated at the individual level. Textual shifts can thus be seen as the process motivated by intertextuality, the factors of contingency, discursivity, dynamism, association, and recall that set in motion the mutually constitutive but ever-changing relationship between reader and text.

Significantly, Bennett and Woollacott also theorize textual shifters as the means by which a text retains a historical presence, since the shifts which keep it “alive” are also constantly redetermining that text’s relation to history (263). This aspect of their concept is particularly germane, for it addresses the historicity of altered horizons of expectations. Textual shifters such as socio-political conditions, audience demands or adaptations, commercial interests, ideological agendas and/or creative license on the part of the producers of texts, introduce modifications and variations into the order of signification, and audiences’ relation to the media. Further, new meanings and uses of Bara’s image have been fostered by ongoing additions to the intertextual network that surrounds her.

The status of Bara’s image as an amalgamation of variations and appropriations underscores my contention that the loss of her films has likely supported rather than undermined her memorability. Loss is a condition (textual shift) that by necessity requires both producers and

consumers to “fill in the gaps” with material found in the intertextual network, which in this particular case inevitably leads back into the past. This diachronic as well as synchronic dissemination is a shift that increases the intertextual range, not just altering the media user’s horizon of expectations but exponentially expanding the range of “likely” readings of Bara’s image. As such, these factors open her image to idiosyncratic interpretations, thus increasing its adaptability to a variety of uses across differing socio-historical contexts. In other words, interaction with both the intertextual and the historic increases media consumers’ opportunities to participate in acts of repurposing older media.

### **History, Representation, and the Politics of Parody**

Unlike most other stars of the 1910s and 1920s, Bara has been able not just to survive loss but to flourish. In part, this has to do with the degree of her past popularity, which makes her a useful symbol of a certain time and worldview, but it is also because that popularity renders her something of an enigma to later audiences. Her typecasting in cinema as a mystery woman has been replicated in cultural memory by the inaccessibility of her films—the very texts that would presumably do the most to explain her popularity. But Bara was also repeatedly reintroduced into popular culture because the titillating, formerly shocking aspects of her image—sex, exoticism, unruliness, wickedness—not only continued to interest audiences, but could be readily reframed as nostalgia, kitsch, camp, or critique, making her a ready conduit for various parodic intents.

Parody, according to Dentith, is “one of the many forms of intertextual allusion” from which new texts emerge (6). Similarly, Hutcheon suggests that postmodern parody is synonymous with intertextuality (88). Looking at parody in this way, as a specialized kind of intertextuality, gives some idea as to how parody generates new readings and uses of old texts.

Hutcheon proposes that parody is received in two phases. First, it calls to a spectator's mind a familiar horizon of expectations, which she describes as "formed by recognizable conventions of genre, style, or form of representation." Once this conventional set of expectations has been evoked, parody then presents the opportunity for those expectations to be "destabilized and dismantled step by step" (110). A parodic image of Marilyn Monroe costumed as and imitating Bara, for instance, introduces new ways of thinking about both stars, with a dialogue between their two images generating meanings and uses perhaps otherwise undiscoverable. Parody thus destabilizes a viewer's horizon of expectations and patterns of interpretation. Making sense of the connection between Bara and Monroe, however, is also a kind of *re*-stabilization, one that might result in different interpretations of gender relations, female sexuality, or of the cultural and political differences between past and present. The dialogue initiated by parody also expands a viewer's store of knowledge. In this case, for audiences who know Monroe but not Bara, the parody initiates a reformulation of associations with Monroe, who now becomes a frame of reference for knowing about and remembering the earlier star.

Both Hutcheon and Dentith further address the political aspects of parody's capacity to generate new ways of knowing old texts. Dentith defines parody as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (9). The emphasis in his definition on polemics rather than humor perhaps runs contrary to the common understanding of the term—although he does attest that parody "works better" if it is humorous, "because laughter, even of derision, helps it secure its point" (37). The polemics, and by extension the politics, of parody are effective frames of reference for assessing the cultural meaning and relevance of Bara's image to audiences across a span of time and place.

What makes Dentith's conception of parody even more applicable to a cultural history of Bara is his contention that there is a "deliberate evaluative intonation" in how parody alludes to a precursor text (6). Locating and analyzing these "intonations," I believe, is a way of tracking the reconfigured relations between texts and readers. The frequency of humor in parodies of Bara is a broad "intonation," but the particulars of specific instances are highly indicative of both the dominant discourse and the counter-discourses within a particular context. Many of the examples of parody I examine in this chapter, for instance, demonstrate changes in attitudes towards sexuality, which can be gauged in part by the presence, absence, degree, and kind of humor employed in representations of the exotic femme fatale and the power she wields through sexuality.

Parody thus can be particularly telling of how different groups respond to and make sense of social change. Assessing the socio-political effects of parody, Dentith writes that its "polemical direction" does not necessarily imitate a precursor text to denigrate it, but can function as an "attack" against "some *new* situation to which it can be made to allude" (9, emphasis mine). In encountering new situations, parody can assume a polemical direction that is either conservative or subversive. According to Dentith, conservative parody delimits, reinforces, and polices "the bounds of the sayable" (20) by mocking and ridiculing "whatever is new, unusual, or threatening to the status quo" (19). In laying out parody's subversive function, Dentith sees parallels to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, contending that parody can be a means of "unsettling the certainties which sustain the social order" and further "attacks the official word, mocks the pretensions of authoritative discourse, and undermines the seriousness with which subordinates should approach the justifications of its betters" (20).

While the observation that parody can be either conservative or subversive—or indeed, both at once—is not startling, it has important ramifications for this chapter’s overview of Bara as an intertextual construct. I am less interested in trying to determine whether a particular case study reads as conservative or subversive, however, than as to how parodies enable the reinterpretation of conventional discourse, the examination of assumptions about the past, and how acts of repurposing older media for new uses works as a form of remembrance. A major part of this inquiry is exploring the ways Bara’s image has been appropriated as the basis for new cultural productions, some of which perform a cultural critique of past beliefs and attitudes, and some of which, particularly the more recent examples, engage in a kind of revisionist history by focusing on less flashy aspects of Bara’s image (her Judaism, her work ethic, her quiet and retiring “real” personality) that are better repurposed for current day concerns. Because of this focus, I find an even more pertinent aspect of Dentith’s evaluation of the polemical nature of parody in his assertion that parody must be considered according to its functions in varying historical, social, and political contexts: “Parody itself is socially and politically multivalent; its particular uses are never neutral, but they cannot be deduced in advance” (28). Along with this, Dentith reasserts the imbrication of parody and intertextuality, writing that the social and cultural meanings of parody “can only be understood in the density of the interpersonal and intertextual relations in which it intervenes” (37).

Interpersonal and intertextual relations are particular concerns in Hutcheon’s evaluation of parody in its role as a form of representation. Indeed, she identifies parody’s key function as revealing the politics of representation, proposing that it makes us “aware of both the limits and the powers of representation” (94). The recognition that parody by nature mines the past to reformulate representations for the sensibilities of the present shows us the history of those

representations, and can alert us to the “ideological consequences” that “derive from both continuity and difference” in subsequent instances of parodies (89). This is significant, Hutcheon contends, in that acknowledgment of the historicity of representation in a work of parody is “value-problematizing” and opens the potential to denaturalize and deconstruct its mode of representation (90). In these terms, parody performs a “contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history” (91). Thus, parody’s “critical contextualizing and appropriating of the past and its representational strategies” (100) offers a way of exposing and questioning the processes by which some representations are “legitimized and authorized,” and others are not (97).

As this suggests, Hutcheon theorizes the potential for parody to subvert hegemonic knowledge and value systems by disrupting or denaturalizing those ways of knowing. Hutcheon and Dentith both regard popular cultural parodies as potential sites of intervention into the dominant discourse. Dentith argues that parody, as “both a symptom and a weapon in the battle between popular cultural energies and the forces of authority which seek to control them” (23), becomes the “medium of important cultural statements” under certain social or historical conditions (31). In this light, he regards the pervasiveness of parody in contemporary popular culture as a “testimony to its effect in dissolving the fixed supports of linguistic and cultural authority” (23-4). What remains under-theorized here, though, is the vicissitudes of authority; parody may generate many new insights about the status quo, but the institutions that support that status quo are also in a state of reformulation that may check the counter-messages generated by parody. Hutcheon, writing of the “potentially positive oppositional and contestatory nature of parody” (109), focuses more specifically on what she calls postmodern cinema, arguing that while it cannot deny its position in capitalist modes of production, it nonetheless “exploits its

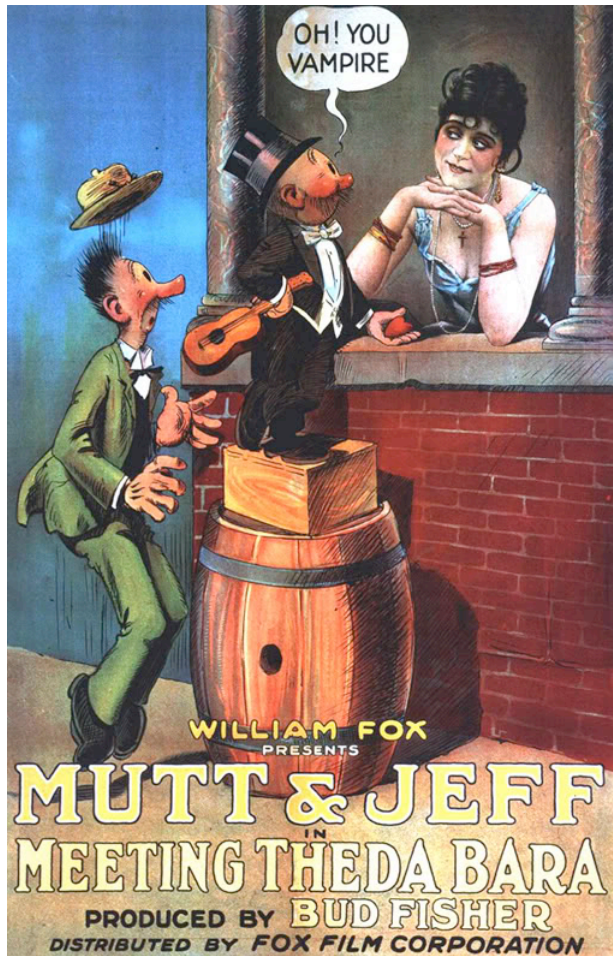


‘insider’ position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live” (109).

While I will be analyzing cultural productions that could qualify as postmodern later in this chapter, I would also argue that earlier works, too, *especially* parodic works, can conduct a similar kind of destabilizing critique, with their polemical position, evocations of the carnivalesque, or refusal to “take things seriously” encouraging a reexamination of the familiar. Parody has repeatedly brought to the surface different layers of Bara’s palimpsestic image that appeal to changing sensibilities. As a reworking of precursor texts that allude to various intertextual elements, parody has been perhaps the primary contributor to the adaptability of Bara’s image, and thus to its cultural viability and memorability. The question remains, however, as to what socio-political ramifications these processes of rearticulating and re-presenting the Bara image have had.

### **Early-onset Nostalgia: Bara Parodies 1910s–1930s**

Sending up Bara’s star image is nothing new. Even during her years as a working actress, many film commentators and moviegoers regarded her vamp image as an amusingly (or aggravatingly) bizarre caricature of feminine allure. Indeed, the exaggeration that prompted such readings may have been a socio-political necessity, for its suggestion of the fantastic and the ridiculous neutered the star’s potential threat to propriety: eroticism made “safe” by being pushed to an extreme edge where shock or titillation may induce laughter rather than outrage or arousal. As Gaylyn Studlar writes, Bara’s image was “so ‘touchy’ and troublesome in its sexual implications...that it easily became a target for anxiety-deflecting ridicule” (“Theda Bara” 135).



**Figure 2.2**

personage and cartoon characters meet and act together on the screen” (F. Fox).<sup>3</sup> The cartoon short, probably not coincidentally, was distributed by Fox Film Corporation, so the parody would have served as disguised promotion for the studio’s notorious star. While an elaborate color poster (Figure 2.2), reproductions of which are surprisingly abundant through Internet retailers, survives, the cartoon itself is apparently lost.<sup>4</sup>

Even if forgotten almost as soon as they appeared, minor texts like “Meeting Theda Bara” or *Madame Mystery* nonetheless can be seen as having a ripple effect on later representations and interpretations of the star. By the 1930s earlier parodies such as these had

In addition to examples such as Fanny Brice’s Ziegfeld Follies number “I’m Bad” or the song “Theda Bara, I’ll Keep Away from You,” both 1916 (see Chapter One), other early parodies include female impersonator Bothwell Browne lampooning Bara’s vamp in the Mack Sennett-produced World War I propaganda film *Yankee Doodle in Berlin* (Jones, 1919) (Gagman). A 1918 cartoon titled “Meeting Theda Bara” was one amongst hundreds of animated Mutt and Jeff shorts produced by the characters’ creator, Bud Fisher. The short was described in a contemporaneous newspaper review as possibly “the first time in the history of motion pictures” in which “a real life

already exerted influence on how Bara was remembered, and had done so in a way I contend aided her star image in navigating the cultural tumults of social and political changes, including some formidable challenges. With the standardization of synchronized sound, the 1930s were a period in which silent films and their stars were quickly relegated to antique status. During this period, MGM released a series of shorts billed as “Goofy Movies” that added snide commentary over fragments from silent films for ostensibly comic effect; RKO repeated the formula for its “Flicker Flashbacks” series of the 1940s. As Haidee Wasson writes, the “histrionic gestures and archaic conventions” of silent film made even the most tragic narratives comic: “Old films, now co-articulated with the historical, became part of a simultaneously laughable and laudable event” (173). Additionally, many silent-era films and stars were mocked or disparaged in the popular press, reflecting and/or influencing general reception of mass audiences.<sup>5</sup>

This was also the period in which the majority of prints and negatives of Bara’s films were likely lost, most disastrously in a 1937 fire that ravaged one of Fox Film Corporation’s storage facilities in Little Ferry, New Jersey. Through the combined loss of films and dwindling first-hand experiences of having seen her onscreen, each subsequent decade beyond the 1910s represented a further distancing from a “living memory” of Bara, replaced by a highly variable collective memory of the star, formed and perpetuated solely by other media texts. Already by 1933, Collins, in describing Bara as “the best of her kind in a primitive day,” wrote that she was little more than a “tradition” to younger moviegoers—if they knew of her at all (78).

Perhaps in light of this, along with her failed comeback attempts, DeWitt Bodeen wrote in the late 1960s that Bara’s “name meant nothing to the Depression generation” (281). This observation, however, doesn’t tell the whole story. Whether Bara represented only a memory or a “tradition,” it appears audiences retained some interest in the star regardless of other

circumstances. Throughout the 1930s, Bara maintained a “household name” degree of notoriety, although generally of the “whatever happened to?” stripe. Mid-decade, for instance, it was reported that she was still receiving hundreds of letters from fans,<sup>6</sup> and Paramount was said to have been “deluged” with wires and letters requesting Bara be cast in the 1936 film *Hollywood Boulevard*, which was to feature “old timers.”<sup>7</sup>

Recognition of her name and image was kept in circulation throughout the period in scattered press reports, some hinting at yet more comeback attempts, others featuring interviews. Parody and nostalgia, frequently in combination, however, were the primary modes of invoking Bara in popular culture discourse. By as early as the mid-1920s, she was being associated in the popular press with childhood memories.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly distanced from audiences and cultural relevance by this evocation of nostalgia, she was thoroughly transformed by the 1930s from a sex symbol to a curiosity. Bara, her notorious image, and her films—*Cleopatra* most particularly—were widely regarded as relics from a now strange and rather droll past.

As this suggests, however, nostalgic linkage to the past has benefited Bara’s retention in cultural memory. In her cultural history of King Kong, Erb describes the circumstances contributing to Kong’s continued cultural remembrance and relevance—circumstances that apply to Bara as well. Erb contends that with an increased “nostalgia value” appended to Kong over time, parodies “became an increasingly salient aspect of its textual ‘spread’ through culture,” and in such a way that the parodies evince the figure’s “changing significance,” particularly to marginalized constituencies (160). Similarly, Bara’s “nostalgia value” may have allowed her to be remembered in ways that reactivate rather than just recall her image. Such reactivations may also hold ideological implications. Nostalgia can be experienced on an individual level as an affective response tied with personal memory, but memory is also subject to considerable

revision through processes of selective forgetting and a highly subjective “filling in the blanks.” Nostalgia can also be felt collectively, as an idealized, sentimentalized form of cultural memory, one that has been roundly criticized as a blinkered vision of the past that resists looking at troubling aspects of history. Both kinds of nostalgia carry political implications for the remembrance and repurposing of the Bara image.

It is also important to keep in mind that both levels of nostalgia are highly likely to be shaped and perpetuated by the mass media, and in such a way that one can become nostalgic for something one has never directly experienced, harboring a sense of fondness and even longing sparked by an imposed memory. The invocation of Bara’s name in popular media of this era appears to presume not only audience recognition, but also a general comprehension of the name “Theda Bara” as an evocation of a time that, from even a comparatively brief temporal distance, was deemed “simpler.”

Thus, from the end of World War I onwards, the predominant iteration of the Bara image, as symbolic of this “simpler” era, was parodic—typically gentle, although occasionally scathing. Examples abound of popular culture texts lampooning either Bara herself, the trope of the vamp, the outmoded cultural mores she challenged, or nostalgic sentimentality for the same. Parodies of this era also hyperbolized the outrageousness of Bara’s 1910s publicity and film roles, generally as a way of mocking the (exaggerated) extremes of Bara’s convoluted image, but also to laugh at the presumed gullibility of the people of the past. The wilder and more exploitative the stories, the more entertaining they were, and the more likely to be reproduced in other sources or enter into “received knowledge” as a folkloric response to the mass media. As a result, by mid-century highly exaggerated-for-effect additions to the Bara “legend” were rampant, such as claims that “Theda was built up as subsisting entirely on a diet of grilled snakes and riding to the studio on

the back of a tiger” (“I Wonder”), or that as a child she had been abducted from the “desert nomads” caring for her by “a troupe of murderous Arabian wrestlers” (Knight and Alpert 136). Exaggerated rememberings of already exaggerated publicity tales have been afforded some authority of “truth”—not of Bara’s life story, but of the schemes of early Hollywood and the nature of the past. This includes the imprimatur of film historiography.

Again, however, this excess has been good for posterity. The easily parodied exaggeration and flamboyance of her image allowed Bara to remain in audiences’ consciousnesses long enough that her stardom outlived the taint of “has-been” in the 1920s, to be afforded a kind of iconic status as the progenitrix of the cinematic bad girl. A 1934 newspaper feature, for instance, in which the International News Service “found Theda Bara in retirement,” sought the expertise of “the queen of the vampires” as to which current film star was the “supreme” vamp.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich topped the list, but Bara’s choice of Mae West for third place possibly offers more insight into Bara’s thoughts on the construction and performance of star image.

“Ah, there’s a real ‘vamp!’” Bara said of West, adding, “She has had the courage to be herself” (Rawles). Her admiration for West “being herself” may reflect Bara’s disillusion with her own experiences at Fox and rigidly enforced image that eventually strangled her career. No less controversial a figure than Bara was in the 1910s, West was one of the most popular stars of the 1930s, credited with buoying Paramount through the Depression (Balio 162). West’s stardom devolved upon an idiosyncratic, inimitable reinterpretation of the sexually knowing, independent woman, carried over from her vaudeville persona and reworked for the screen largely on her own terms. While Bara has historically been credited to varying degrees with concocting elements of her vamp image, West’s contract with Paramount permitted her to write as well as star in her

films (Balio 161). Presumably, this meant that the more playful take on women's sexuality in West's performances reflects a woman's own perspective on sex. Although Tino Balio notes that "Self-regulation played an important part in the creation of Mae West as a cinematic caricature of female sexual aggression" (55), West nonetheless enjoyed probably the highest level of control over her films and image of any female film star since Mary Pickford.



**Figure 2.3:** Costume test photo of Mae West with bat wings for *Belle of the Nineties* (McCarey, 1934)

Bara, who was smart and perceptive, surely recognized West's "larger than life" image as a parody of the vamp (Figure 2.3). As a comedic caricature of the sexually rapacious tough broad, West flaunted conventionality by using humor to indict the cultural frigidity that held in contempt women who expressed interest in sex, as well as the pervasive hypocrisy that both demanded and condemned sexual titillation in its entertainment. Undeniably bawdy, West's approach to sex was far more down to earth, irreverent, and pointedly satirical than that of previous film stars. Her persona and performances thus countered the implications of the 1910s

vamp image that women's only use for sex was to lure, entrap, and control men as the means for the powerless to manipulate the powerful in order to disrupt the social order. Bodeen, in fact, described West as "the coup de grace" to the vamp image, writing, "In a decade and a half US audiences had progressed from secret revelry in the wickedness of sex to an open amusement over an honest and humorous presentation of it" ("Theda Bara" 281-2). Her treatment of eroticism, female desire, and relationships between the sexes as a source of humor rather than something prurient or threatening not only reflected, but in many ways anticipated, changing attitudes, laying the groundwork for subsequent performers and fans alike to adapt, parody, and repurpose the vamp image.

It's also conceivable that Bara might have relished that West's combination of humor and ingenuousness mocked the image of the nefarious female who ruins men through sexual subterfuge; after all, it had been the image that destroyed her box office appeal. West, for her part, had invoked Bara as a component of her wry critique of America's simultaneous obsession with and phobia of sexuality as early as her 1921 "playlet" *The Ruby Ring*. In the short play, West's character describes various vamping techniques and their effectiveness on different types of men, revealing that the Theda Bara method works especially well on professors (Robertson 160).

At the time of West's play, it had been less than two years since Bara had been in a new film, so it's no great surprise that even in her absence from the screen, Bara's name and its associations with seduction and treachery stayed well-known enough to be deployed as the comic element of satire—as it did for decades to come. Bara herself made one last attempt to parody her vamp image when she appeared on Groucho Marx's *Blue Ribbon Town* radio program on May 8, 1943 (Figure 2.4), in what *Radio Daily* described as "her first public





**Figure 2.4:** Photomontage from the *Philadelphia Record* advertising Bara's appearance on Groucho Marx's radio program. Theda Bara Clippings File, 1940-49 file. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

appearance in fifteen years" ("Los Angeles").<sup>10</sup> *Variety* was less than

complimentary of Bara's

appearance, saying that it was

"altogether negative as to her

seductive prowess": "Despite a

terrific buildup via Groucho's intro

for the edification of a new

generation, the erstwhile charmer

failed to impress in one of those

typical Abou Ben Groucho skits

that tried to take up where Miss

Bara had left off some years ago"

("Theda Bara, siren"). Regardless of

the quality of her performance, Bara's

appearance on a popular radio

program, and willingness to burlesque

her image, did indeed keep her in the memory of a "new generation," and reinscribe her

remembrance as both an exotic vamp and a relic from yesteryear who cultural changes had

rendered a source of laughter rather than titillation. These same associations continued to retain

Bara's image, if not always her name, in a general popular cultural familiarity that would stay in

place for the next eight decades, through a chain of trans-media intertextual referents and

variants.

## **“Viva Vamp!”: Sex, Cinema, and Post-Kinsey Retrospectives**

As the 1930s popularity of Mae West suggests, attitudes, values, and knowledge about sexuality had already been expanding for decades. However, the publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953 by sex researchers Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and others, sparked a foundational shift in how the average person thought about sexuality and gender difference. Attributing an “emancipating effect” to the Kinsey Reports, Regina Markell Morantz credits Kinsey with contributing to “a changing sexual climate” by making sexual behavior a matter of science and “relieving guilt” by dissociating sex, including such matters as women’s enjoyment of sex, from moral judgment (582). Morantz sees Kinsey as having “dispelled ignorance about changes in sexual mores which had already taken place, *sub rosa*, since World War I.” By presenting these changes as a reality and a “*fait accompli*,” Morantz argues, “His work demanded more realistic, more humane sex mores,” adding, “He forced public debate over the meaning of sex in modern life as no other author had except Freud” (583). Interest in sex was thus recuperated as normal and healthy, rather than something to be repressed and condemned.

Both Kinsey Reports became best selling books, and Kinsey’s findings became common (if concealed) knowledge in the 1950s—a situation that Jim Cullen proposes is symptomatic of a “yearning” for an alternative to “the enervating compromises implicit in the suburban ethos” of post-war America (154). Whether praising or condemning research into this field, reacting with interest, skepticism, outrage, or hysteria, the popular media covered the reports and reactions widely, heightening the impact of the studies. Part of the attendant normalization of interest in sex appears to have been an inclination in popular media to look back and attempt some sort of historization of attitudes towards sex, perhaps as a way of separating the sexual “sophistication”

of a new generation from the Victorian prudery and naïveté of its forebears, thereby granting contemporary audiences a feeling of superiority.

A number of examples, each serving as a remembrance and a reimagining, illustrate this inclination to look back, often with humor. For instance, there's *Viva Vamp!* (Figure 2.5) a novelty book published in 1960 that juxtaposed

publicity photos of femme fatale stars “from Theda Bara to Marilyn Monroe” with “illustrated commentary”

(cartoons) by Paul Flora. Bara as Cleopatra appears on the cover, and inside images of her are paired with caricatures of Dracula and Dr. Caligari, reinforcing her sinister, foreign image. Additionally, Ogden Nash, waxing nostalgic in the book's introductory verse,

hailed Bara and other silent era vamps as charmingly innocent compared to more recent films' earthier handling

of sex. Or, there's “The History of Sex in Cinema,” a series of painstakingly detailed articles by film critics Arthur Knight and Hollis Alpert that appeared in *Playboy* between 1965 and 1968, in which Bara is presented as symptomatic of 1910s audiences' growing discontent with Victorian values and yen to experience “hedonistic abandonment” vicariously through the movies. There's also the documentary *The Love Goddesses* (Turell and Ferguson, 1965), a compilation of film clips, still images, and voice-over commentary that purports to be an overview of female sex symbols in the movies from May Irwin in Edison's famed 1896 short *The Kiss* to European stars of the 1960s like Brigitte Bardot. Like many other sources, the documentary suggests Bara's



Figure 2.5

vamp was “invented” as a response to the sentimental depictions of innocent, long suffering girl-next-door types.

My primary focus here, however, is on a slightly earlier artifact: a photo feature for the December 22, 1958 issue of *Life* magazine, shot by renowned photographer Richard Avedon, with Marilyn Monroe costumed as various earlier sex symbols. In this “remarkable re-creation of Fabled Enchantresses” Monroe impersonated Bara as well as Lillian Russell, Clara Bow, Marlene Dietrich, and Jean Harlow, all of whom were presented as foremothers to this latest icon of irresistible feminine allure. As Matt Hills observes, stars “self-consciously borrow from prior celebrities” in constructing a persona (*Fan* 164), and these photos visualize a sequence of influences and allusions as part of Monroe’s appeal. I find this example especially telling of how cinema history was “remembered” through other media, how one iconic cultural figure can influence the reception of another, and how parodying the past functions as cultural commentary on both the past and the present.

Groucho Marx famously described Monroe as “Mae West, Theda Bara, and Bo Peep all rolled into one,” recognizing the seductive aspect of her persona, but with a decidedly un-vampish dimension of unaffected, guileless charm to her sexuality. Like Bara, Monroe was, according to Richard Dyer, “virtually a household word for sex” (*Heavenly* 21), and was “the most directly sexual of stars” (*Heavenly* 25) in a time and place (1950s America) in which “sex was seen as perhaps the most important thing in life” (*Heavenly* 22). The photos of Monroe dressed as earlier stars simultaneously perpetuate and challenge conventional attitudes, with the images’ depiction of female sexuality communicating both progressive and oppressive attitudes. In many ways, the Monroe parody appears not merely witty but also satirical in its use of humor to address and even critique the social conventions that influence what is considered desirable.

At the same time, however, the parody still objectifies women as sex symbols, and in a way that appears oblivious to women's agency or the physical and psychological toll of having to conform to imposed standards of "sexiness." Altogether, the photo feature exemplifies Hutcheon's argument that in political terms, parody is "doubly coded." As a form of ironic representation, Hutcheon writes, parody "both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (97). She describes this duality of parody as "authorized transgression."

In attempting to depict Monroe as "her predecessors in their most enduring images," the Bara photo session paid homage to the outré splendor of *Cleopatra*—or perhaps more accurately, an homage to the generalized Orientalist impression of Bara lounging amidst Middle Eastern props and wearing contrivances of beads, rhinestones, chiffon, and plenty of exposed flesh. Two photos from the Bara session are easily findable on the Internet. In both, Monroe wears a black wig, heavy eye makeup, serpent diadem, and coiled snake breast coverings. In keeping with the tendency to remember and represent Bara in the most exaggerated manner, *Life* published an image in which Monroe crouches on oriental rugs and tiger skins, appearing ready to pounce like a wildcat herself, staring into the camera with lowered head and piercing gaze (Figure 2.6). The other photo shows Monroe in a more passive pose, tantalizingly reclining and looking into the camera seductively rather than ferociously (Figure 2.7). This image, more likely to be interpreted as genuinely erotic rather than as a parody of eroticism, went unpublished.





**Figure 2.6**



**Figure 2.7**

The object of parody in the photos appears to be past attitudes towards sex at least as much as the earlier stars. In this way, the images support Hutcheon's contention that parody can be a politically efficacious form of "de-naturalization," here through a process of estrangement. The parodic exaggeration of costuming and poses, particularly in the images of Bara and Russell, suggest that Monroe was still desirable *in spite of* being encumbered by the old-fashioned and now laughable contrivances of what used to pass as erotic. Monroe's sexual allure, Dyer claims, depended on rhetoric of "naturalness" and authenticity of character (*Heavenly* 30), while Bara was all artifice. Part of the humor of the impersonations depends on playing up of the artificiality of the earlier star, with Monroe and the present offered as a point of contrast to Bara and the past: unlike Bara, Monroe did not require ornate trappings to be "naturally" sexy; unlike audiences of the past, audiences of the present were both down to earth and savvy enough to recognize what was "truly" sexy. Monroe, in turn, now fills a similar cultural position as Bara in the 1950s. Dyer describes her as "a talisman of what we are rejecting, of the price people had to pay for living in the regime of sexual discourses of the fifties," and says that current day discourse surrounding Monroe and sexuality "flatters our sense of being so advanced," even if that sense is illusory (*Heavenly* 62-3).

At the same time, by representing some forms of female sexiness as strange or funny and emphasizing the gulf between now and then, there is a possibility that the images may also call into question conventions of the present as well as the past. As a decade-by-decade survey chronicling the changes in what is considered beautiful or erotic, female attractiveness is historicized, demonstrated to be unstable as fashion rather than a fixed, ahistorical standard. Because this is doubly coded as authorized transgression, however, the images might just as easily, if not more so, be read as reinscribing rather than countering objectification of women.

The caption to the published photo spoke to the historicity of eroticism, suggesting that Bara's allure was incomprehensible to a modern sensibility by saying that Bara "puzzled Marilyn," and that "as she fell into Theda Bara's famous Cleopatra pose, giggled, 'What am I supposed to be thinking of?'" (141). At the same time this quote announces the inscrutability of past perspectives, it also can be seen as a reinforcement of Monroe's image as the archetypal "dumb blonde." The Monroe-as-Bara scenario is so fascinating, in part, because out of the five stars she impersonates, Bara's dark, mysterious, foreign, and wicked star image is in many ways the most different from Monroe's blonde, all-American, childlike star image. In fact, the contrast between the two signals different misogynistic responses to women's sexuality at play—one that imagines eroticism as the domain of the unruly, dangerous seductress, the other that perversely finds eroticism in the infantilized.

The vamp, as a warning of the turn-of-the-century New Woman's threat to convention, may have been scheming and self-serving, but in order to bend others to her will also needed to be sophisticated and smart. Indeed, Bara was represented in her publicity, whether as the nefarious man-killer or as the misunderstood "good woman," as an intellectual. Beginning in the 1920s with the flapper, however, sexually attractive and/or active women were increasingly depicted in popular culture as passive, childlike dim bulbs and dumbbells, mentally and emotionally stunted. This is in contrast to depictions of glamorous, worldly-wise "sex goddess" stars who, as Dyer points out, were depicted as "predatory, like a man" in the case of West and Jean Harlow, or "foreign (actually or supposedly) and therefore of a sexuality beyond all scrutiny" in stars such as Garbo, Dietrich, Anna May Wong—and Bara (*Heavenly* 53).

Although Monroe's image was similarly "overdetermined in terms of sexuality," it was not, as Dyer maintains, "an image of the danger of sex" (*Heavenly* 42), but rather "an escape



from the threat posed by female sexuality” (*Heavenly* 39). The infantilizing of desirable women so apparent in Monroe’s star image is perhaps the most representative popular cultural example of a post-World War II backlash against the independence women had found during wartime, and a post-Kinsey regression wherein female eroticism is made “safe” by representing the sex object as innocent and stupid. Bara and the femme fatale, by contrast, could still represent the threat of a sexualized woman who uses male desire to her own advantage. Her thwarting of domesticity and submissiveness was a dangerous proposition for the 1950s, but one that could be neutered through conservative parody.

In significant ways, however, Monroe and Bara share many similarities, not the least being that the remembrance and cultural relevance of both Norma Jeane Mortenson and Theodosia Goodman—the stars’ offscreen selves—involve recognition that the women behind their respective façades were at odds with, and damaged by, the inescapable outer personae demanded by fame. The retrospective enhancement of importance of this aspect of both stars’ biographies exemplifies how star images are modified to fit changing concerns and perspectives. In her analysis of the recirculation in cultural memory and rearticulation of myths surrounding Monroe, S. Paige Baty writes “It appears that we as a culture cannot forget Marilyn Monroe, so we make her up again and again” (4). This adaptability to reinterpretations and repurposings is perhaps the most significant commonality between the reception of Bara and Monroe’s images. “The further we get from Monroe and the fifties,” Dyer writes, “the more it seems that her image is so malleable that it can mean almost anything” (*Heavenly* 62). Feminist analyses of Monroe’s image and biography, he observes, have regarded her “as, at worst, the ultimate example of woman as victim as sex object, and at best, as in rebellion against her objectification” (*Heavenly* 56). At an even greater temporal remove, Bara’s image has been just as malleable, and just as

open to ideological debate, as Monroe's, even if she is recalled less as a specific star than as a generalized impression of the silent-era vamp.

In this way, the continued circulation of Bara's image and the character type she embodied have the same kind, if perhaps not the same degree, of political functionality and capacity to support alternative readings and uses as Monroe's. Echoing an argument made by Dyer and others, Baty contends that marginalized groups including women and ethnic minorities, who may lack resources elsewhere, can locate potential moments of empowerment in easily accessible popular culture. As I argued in Chapter One, media use of this kind sets up the conditions for popular culture reception to become an alternative historical record. As Baty writes, the "political cultural rememberings" one may encounter in popular culture "posit terms of identity, history, and community through their circulation" (18), opening the possibility for alternative, possibly even subversive, interpretations. Baty further theorizes how intertextuality contributes to cultural memory and the expansion of horizons of expectations: "Cultural remembering... is not limited to narrative circulation and construction: it is also made manifest through the production of images and artifacts." Such artifacts and images, described as "'iconographic' rememberings," function as conduits of "explicit messages and histories," and also become objects of memory themselves, perpetuating and transforming remembrance and signification of the star image (10, note 17).

"Iconographic remembering" is an apt description of Monroe's impersonations of earlier actresses, but if as parody it only qualifies as "authorized transgression," what potential might this photo feature have to communicate the "explicit messages and histories" that might encourage alternative readings? Some possibilities may be found in *Life*'s attempts to historicize and contextualize Bara. In easily digested "info bites," the caption to the photo deems Bara

historically and culturally significant, crediting her as “the original vampire,” and claiming that she was an inspiration to “all the women who came bursting from their stays in World War I with predatory eyes and heavy make-up into the new freedom” (“Marilyn Monroe” 141).

An accompanying essay by Monroe’s then-husband Arthur Miller gave prestige to the *Life* feature while also extending the cultural and historical significance of the whole “feat.” Astutely describing the photo spread as “a kind of history of our mass fantasy, so far as seductresses are concerned,” Miller emphasized both Monroe’s playfulness and her emotional empathy in transforming the images “from what might have been only a stunt into a human statement”:

By her magical power of sympathy I believe Marilyn has identified herself with what surely was naïve in these women, what to them in their moment was genuine lure and sexual truth. So that while we must smile at some of the costumes and postures, it is possible in these pictures to understand how these women could once draw millions of people to see them and dream of them. (146)

Thinking about the larger meaning of Monroe’s parodic impressions, Miller appeared to be saying, could be a means of understanding people of the past, and by extension, historicizing the values and tastes of contemporary audiences. The very act of Monroe impersonating earlier stars, along with Miller’s indication that she selected certain aspects of those stars’ images to emulate based on her own character traits, also conveys some ideas about the performativity of identity, and how older media artifacts can play into one’s enactment of self. Monroe could temporarily embody these other stars, but there was also something in each that contributed to her star image, how she performed that image, and how audiences were able to understand that image within a trajectory of changing opinions about sexuality and gender.

As post-Kinsey texts writing a populist history of female sexuality in film, intertextual artifacts such as *Viva Vamp!*, *The Love Goddesses*, the *Playboy* “History of Sex in Cinema,” and the *Life* photo feature share what appears to be a new attitude about sex: an unabashed fascination that is also irreverent and even lighthearted, rather than indignant or prudishly timorous. These texts, however, can at best be seen as transitional. Although post-Kinsey, they all also antedate the mainstreaming of women’s liberation, and as such still reflect a very limited, hegemonic reaction to eroticism and women’s sexuality; at worst, their humorous take on sex approaches the juvenile and the misogynistic. Each, however, contain elements that at least begin to suggest that the erotic could be pleasurable without being puerile, and use humor not just to reduce female sexuality to a tawdry joke, but also to indicate that it was nothing to fear. As such, they give evidence that the sexual revolution associated with the late 1960s, and the rise of the counterculture, leftist ideology, identity politics, and women’s liberation, were more of a gradual development than a sudden sharp break with the 1950s mentality. In this way, these parodies, even at their most seemingly retrograde, give some indication as to how the repurposing of old media not merely reflects changing socio-political conditions, but can also precede and perhaps motivate such changes.

### **“That Slinky Silent Movie Queen”: Bara and Post-Sexual Revolution Television**

Parodies of Bara on television throughout the 1950s and 1960s were generally even less dynamic or complex than those in other media. It is likely, though, that they were more widely received and thus more effective in holding her place in cultural memory. Indeed, representations of and references to Bara in broadcast television’s first three decades were in many ways more about

the (inadvertent) preservation of the Bara image than any productive or provocative re-  
imagination of that image.



**Figure 2.8:** A photograph included on the sheet of stamps honoring “Early Memories” of television put out by the United States Postal Service in 2008 (although not on a stamp itself), shows Berle (far left), a comedian known for incorporating drag into his routines, in an elaborate Cleopatra costume and grotesque makeup that seems an obvious reference to Bara.

Bara’s name and the connotations it evoked were occasionally used to humorous effect in early television, when at least part of the televiewing audience would still have been familiar enough with her image to “get it” in the context of a joke. A 1954 episode of the sitcom *The Stu Irwin Show* typifies the kind of humor connected with Bara’s name and its signification of the overbearing, inappropriate, or clumsy use of feminine wiles: a tomboyish teenage girl, attempting to impress a boy by dolling herself up, prompts a bemused adult to exclaim, “Well! Who does she think she is, Theda Bara?”. Television comedies such as *The Jack Benny Program*<sup>11</sup> and *Texaco Star Theater* with Milton Berle<sup>12</sup> invoked Bara as a laugh-getter in similar ways (Figure 2.8), and comediennes in early television travestied Bara through comic impressions. An episode of *The Ed Wynn Show*, original air date January 7, 1950, featured a spoof of silent movies in which Lucille Ball played “a Theda Bara-type vamp” (“Ed Wynn”). Sid Caesar’s innovative sketch comedy program *Your Show of Shows* satirized *A Fool There Was*

sometime in the early 1950s,<sup>13</sup> with Imogene Coca “as a Theda Bara vamp with a huge black wig, turning all eyes as she slinked slowly down a grand staircase” (Rosenberg G1; 15).

Despite these recurring appearances, early television parodies represent a fairly stagnant period as far as the cultural meaningfulness of Bara’s star image, at least in the mass media. The



**Figure 2.9:** *Fractured Flickers* host Hans Conried introduces viewers to Theda Bara.

standard representation of Bara was of an absurd antique from the early, primitive days of motion pictures, with the vamp herself shown to be primitive as well, an over-sexed, out of control, grotesque absurdity. Bara again was depicted as a negative example and a warning to women, although the danger implied by these parodies was not of becoming a dissolute moral wanton, but of becoming a fool. In the early 1960s, the syndicated

program *Fractured Flickers*,<sup>14</sup> which like cinematic forebears “Goofy Movies” and “Flicker Flashbacks,” repurposed silent films by overdubbing dialogue and sound effects, singled Bara out for attention. The set of the program featured a large portrait of Bara in costume for *Cleopatra*, prominently visible in all twenty-six episodes, onto which had been drawn a bushy black moustache, simultaneously presenting her as an iconic figure of the silent screen and as a camp, unintentionally funny relic of the past (Figure 2.9).

Televised parody of this sort, of silent film and Bara both, remained for decades the orthodox mode of representation, and hence a predominant influence on reception. While

television's recirculation of the Bara-vamp image typically reflected a conservative response to gender and sexuality by making her (and often, by extension, women in general) the butt of silly jokes, certain evocations of the image on 1950s and 1960s television, such as local affiliate horror film hostesses (discussed in Chapter Three), and later rearticulations of the image, indicate that alternatives to the dominant discourse were in circulation, and that polyvalent interpretations were ongoing.

On into the 1960s, allusions to Bara appeared on sitcoms ranging from *Gilligan's Island* to *That Girl* (these two youth-oriented programs in particular exemplify how television could introduce her to new audiences). Parodic impressions of Bara by television actresses continued into the popular hour-long variety programs of the 1970s, but with notable variations. Although less frequent, these later parodies reflect the political changes of late 1960s, when fundamental shifts in cultural perceptions increased awareness of social inequities and activated engagement with identity politics. This in turn prompted widespread questioning of hegemonic structures and reevaluations of cultural mores and the place of marginalized groups, including women. The very same features of Bara's image—sensuality, brazenness, melodramatics, defiance of gender and sexual conventions, spectacular appearance—that made her useable as a punch line in earlier television were now useful in satirizing archaic attitudes about “woman's place.” This included mocking the idea that female empowerment, including sexual freedom, was a threat to the social order.

Still, as Erb points out, cultural texts from this period must be evaluated with acknowledgment that the 1970s also saw a considerable backlash against feminist politics (182), and mainstream media such as commercial television would not have risked alienating viewers by challenging conventions too blatantly. She also finds that even popular cultural figures that

appear to be forums for “speaking sex” betray contradictory ideologies, “generally maintaining normative assumptions, rather than challenging them,” with “frequent lapses into incoherence and occasional misogyny, born from what might initially seem progressive revision” (178). With this in mind, no easy conclusions may be drawn about the socio-political causes and effects of Bara parodies of the 1970s, only the observation that they are more nonchalant, more irreverent, and more ironic in their depictions of female sexuality than are earlier such depictions.

Whatever its ideological stance, a skit on *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour* variety program (original air date March 20, 1972) does indicate a changing “intonation” in parodying Bara. In part, the humor of the skit traded upon the similarities between Bara and Cher Bono’s star images, and the resultant ironic critique of sexualization and exoticization. The image by which Cher was promoted—the poly-ethnic, seductive yet scornful “Dark Lady”—in many ways corresponded to the Bara image. Cher’s image, though, was adapted and updated for the tastes and expectations of a post-sexual revolution audience with significantly altered perceptions of men, women, and their interactions. Where Bara “destroyed” men with her sexuality, Cher emasculated with a witty, withering put-down; where Bara’s ethnicity was in essence a kind of blackface marketing gimmick, Cher’s heavily-promoted American Indian ancestry (if not her less-publicized Armenian heritage) corresponded with a post-Civil Rights mindset, in which multiculturalism and concern with social justice for minority groups such as Native Americans were becoming more “mainstream.”

Cher’s Bara impersonation was, appropriately, part of a popular recurring routine in which short comic sketches about infamous vamps throughout history were bracketed by explanatory story-songs, sung by Cher perched atop an upright piano in a low-cut red dress as she swept her long black hair off her bare shoulders. By way of setting up the sketch, she sang



lyrics that both explained to viewers unfamiliar with Bara who she was, while at the same time parodying Bara's image for those more familiar with her—or familiar at least with a generalized impression of silent-era stars:

Hot and heavy Theda Bara/That slinky silent movie queen/  
She had a look that turned men scarlet/And women several shades of green/  
Those naughty nickelodeons turned upside down/When Theda turned her heater on and  
went to town/  
She was a scamp, a camp, and a bit of a tramp/She was a V-A-M-P—vamp

The sketch, set in yet another Orientalist, quasi-Egyptian/Arabian milieu, begins with Cher, as Bara, languorously reclining on a chaise, fanned by an attendant. She is costumed in a



**Figure 2.10:** Cher as Bara: reflexive parody of star image as sexual and ethnic performance.

feathered headdress, enormous frizzy black wig, the inevitable bejeweled brassiere, and a skirt of beads, spangles, and diaphanous veils, again in obvious reference to the visual spectacle of *Cleopatra* (Figure 2.10).

In fact, the setting and costuming so completely associates Bara with a Cleopatra

type that it reinforces, with little nuance or revision (or, in the case of viewers unfamiliar with Bara, *introduces*) the predominant

cultural memory of Bara as a slightly ludicrous exotic siren of unspecified ethnicity and historical era, given to lolling about in revealing clothes. The humor of the sketch turns on these associations, with the Cher/Bara character shown as indiscriminately promiscuous and deceptive,

indulging in “infidelities” with numerous lackeys dressed in costumes similar to that of her “sweetheart,” the “Sheik of Araby” (played by, of all people, Merv Griffin).

Unlike Bara’s vamp, however, the Cher incarnation is not shown to be malicious or vindictive in her sexuality, but in a post-sexual revolution variation, indulges in multiple sexual encounters for pleasure, or out of boredom. While waiting for the Sheik, she confides in a low, suggestive voice directed to the camera that he makes her “rubies tingle,” perhaps in reference to the red rhinestones concealing her nipples, and fools around with an imposter sheik (Sonny Bono) because he’s “kind of cute.” Commenting on the sketch, a YouTube viewer, apparently appreciative of the sexy but irreverent, flippant aspect of Cher’s star image, writes that it is “quite the excuse for Cher to do what Cher does best.....VAMP! (and play dress up to the max....)” (LisaJMoore) (punctuation original to viewer commentary).

The sketch also represents the give-and-take nature of popular culture preserving and disseminating knowledge about earlier popular culture phenomena. Here, Bara is limited to *Cleopatra* associations. Both the introductory lyrics and the action within the sketch indicate how pre-sound cinema was imagined as one indistinguishable period, Bara equated with both the nickelodeons that pre-dated her film career and the Valentino-style Sheik that post-dated it. The skit is keeping all of these referents, however, in popular cultural circulation, if in reduced, confused form. Further, the current accessibility of the sketch on DVD and online means that the skit functions as a sort of cultural mnemonic device not only for television audiences of the 1970s, but cross-media consumers decades later, whose interest in Cher may lead them to discover Bara.

The sketch does incorporate one Bara reference beyond *Cleopatra*, when Cher demands that Griffin “Kiss me, you fool,” the fabled title card (or close enough) from *A Fool There Was*.

Many viewers, however, may have interpreted this as an allusion to another sketch comedy program of the era, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, rather than in homage to Bara's films or image. Paul Coates, writing for the *Los Angeles Mirror* in 1961, may have believed "'kiss me, my fool,' remained on the public's lips for almost a generation before it wore out." But the line, slightly altered, nonetheless retained enough cultural cachet to become a recurring one-liner on a hip, topical program like *Laugh-In*, known for coining catchphrases which entered into pop cultural parlance. Recontextualized in such a way that the overdramatic quality of the utterance seemed to mock the very idea of romantic passion, "Kiss me, you fool" was the catchphrase of *Laugh-In* cast member Jo Anne Worley, whose brash, loudmouthed flamboyance and drag queen-style glamour came across as a particularly goofy parody of the vamp. The fact that both *Laugh-In* and *Sonny and Cher* were especially popular with younger audiences meant that at least some variation of Bara was remembered, some allusion or image, even if separated from her name, retained in cultural memory.

Performers like Cher and Worley enacted a type of ramped-up femininity, parodic in its excessiveness, making the object of male desire so extreme as to be intimidating, even off-putting. Although these performers caricatured the sexualized woman as exuberantly aggressive or disdainfully snide for laughs, in many ways they also anticipate a feminist strategy in the punk subculture of combining the sexually alluring with threatening or frightening elements to complicate women's sexuality without denying it—a strategy that will be explored further in Chapter Three. Other comedic actresses, such as Imogene Coca and Carol Burnett, critiqued conventions of femininity by exaggerating their distance from culturally mandated standards of beauty. What was funny about Coca playing Bara, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article, was that "smoldering sex was hardly a Coca trademark" (Rosenberg 15).

Burnett's image and style of humor, as described by Susan Horowitz, "diffuses social tension" through "comic exaggeration of her defects," but does so in such a way that she "emerges as the manipulator of the situation" (69). This is evident in the many parodies of Hollywood films on her eponymous variety program, on which Burnett often played up the inability of her characters to perform conventional femininity, no matter how hard they tried. Burnett's imitations of Hollywood actresses crossed the line from glamorous artifice to grotesquerie. The awkwardness of her actions, and the absurdity of her costumes, make-up, and hairstyles, often only slightly exaggerated from the parodied films and stars, destabilized expectations of feminine appearance, behavior, and capitulation to male desire by depicting these conventions as farce. Remarking on Burnett's tendency to draw upon her sexuality in the context of a joke, Horowitz specifically references a *Carol Burnett Show* skit set in ancient Rome in which Burnett "plays an empress outfitted like Theda Bara." In the sketch, Burnett's vamp character tries to seduce a slave (played by Sid Caesar), who proceeds to accidentally stab her (74).

For all the implications of contravention in Burnett's image and humor, this particular skit at best sends a problematically mixed message, and illustrates Erb's cautionary note about 1970s parodies maintaining rather than challenging conventions. Also commenting on the ambivalent meanings communicated by comedy, Henry Jenkins explains how many female comics of the past have been "rescued" by recent feminist criticism that explores the capacity for unruly women making spectacles of themselves to challenge "the conventional construction of women's desires and sexuality" and promote "a more active and empowered vision of femininity." He also points out, though, that the progressive potential of these comic antics can be easily overstated, especially when the gendered aspects of comedic performance are separated

from other considerations, such as race (*Wow* 129)—an especially germane issue with Bara and Cher both. The racist notion that the ethnically or racially Other is more sexualized may take on a slightly different intonation in a post-sexual revolution context, in which sexual expression is seen as liberating rather than degrading. Dark, exotic Cher's seductiveness may have been overstated enough to be seen as comedic artifice in a more sexually sophisticated age, but her fetishistic, body-revealing costumes could still objectify the ethnic woman's body for those same audiences, in much the same way that Bara's fetishistic, body-revealing costumes did for 1910s audiences.

The type of parodic humor described in the West, Monroe, and Cher examples, and the reactions by successive generations of audiences, play upon the *campiness* of the vamp. Although "camp" as a term and a concept is notoriously slippery, evaluating Bara's image vis-à-vis camp sheds light not only on how it has been remembered, but also on *why*, regarding its political implications. Camp, describing a certain taste sensibility, is generally understood as a way of looking at and critiquing the dominant culture from the margins. Camp is also typically understood as a specifically gay male sensibility, a wry, ironic appreciation of cultural productions that, through their excessive or faulty imitations of the dominant order, don't seem to "fit" within that order. In this way, camp can be seen as having the potential to expose the constructedness of social systems, including those that delegate gendered and sexual behaviors into categories of "wrong" and "right." As David Bergman writes, camp is "the poststructuralist mode *par excellence*" in that it reveals and destabilizes "culturally determined codes," opening them to analysis and criticism (94).

One must be alert, however, to overestimating the subversion of camp, to universalizing a "gay sensibility," or to defining camp as the exclusive domain of gay men. Scholars looking at

camp have found it useful to describe camp in terms of types or degrees. Barbara Klinger uses the term “mass camp” to refer to an institutionalization or “demarginalization” of camp as a response, brought about by social and cultural changes that have extended this mode of reception “beyond the subcultural to include the audience at large” (*Melodrama* xix). This “growing egalitarian spirit in mass culture,” Klinger explains, is due in part to an increased emphasis of parody and reflexivity in film and television, coupled with a pervasive “consciousness-raising” amongst mass audiences about issues of gender and sexuality (*Melodrama* 139). Taking a more apprehensive view of the mainstreaming of camp and seeing it as a cooption of gay political concerns, Moe Meyer distinguishes between camp and “pop camp,” referring to the de-queered, de-politicized variation adapted for the dominant social order (Cleto 16-17).

It’s important to make the distinction between different kinds of camp, because while much of the appreciation of Bara over time has involved a camp sensibility, it appears to be of a particular sort. Jack Babuscio mentions Bara (along with fellow silent vamp Pola Negri) in his landmark essay on gay camp response to film as an example of the passage of time rendering old icons camp, with Bara’s sexual allure now seeming “fairly fantastic” (46). However, unlike many of the other female stars discussed in this chapter—West, Monroe, Cher, Burnett—Bara does not hold status as a gay icon. Eve Golden deems Bara too inaccessible to attain iconic status, in part because she was a silent star: “You need talking images, to be able to quote them: Bankhead, Davis, Crawford, West.” Additionally, Bara did not have the “kind of private life that makes (stars) iconic to some in the gay community,” such as Monroe or Judy Garland (e-mail interview). While Bara may be identifiable as campy to gay and straight sensibilities (in all their varieties) alike, she has not been recognized as having the singular qualities that might have made her useful as a subcultural signifier to a “critical mass” of gay men. While it therefore

seems that an identifiably, politically gay camp sensibility has not been a significant factor in the remembrance of Bara's image, a similar kind of ironic appreciation has made Bara's image highly useful and open to repurposing for other marginal positions, especially noticeable in more recent repurposings of the Bara image.

### **Sympathy for the Vampire: Repurposing as Identity Politics, 1990s to the Present**

Among the concerns of this chapter are questions about the influences and cultural differences between the entertainment industry's reworking of old media through parody, and individuals producing similar kinds of repurposings. Undeniably, modifications shaped by commercial concerns have had a major influence on the remembrance of Bara, but not exclusively.

Regardless of the "purity" of intent behind the repurposing of the Bara image, the very fact that it has been revisited yields benefits. These benefits can be in terms of cultural heritage—Bara *has* been remembered, even if it's primarily because she's been made fun of. The benefits also take the form of opportunities made available to audiences—the more cultural productions that survive, even if only as a assemblage of intertextual referents, the broader the field of choices for the media consumer to explore and make use of. In this way, access to a wide-ranging intertextual field increases the likelihood of expanding a media consumer's horizons of expectations, and along with it a more informed and purposeful interaction with the mediascape.

As the media artifacts discussed in this chapter indicate, social, political, and historical changes across the twentieth century altered the relationship between audiences and what Bara's image signified, or was readily able to signify. In making this assertion, I also believe Bara serves as a particularly resonant example of how cultural tropes can lie dormant for years prior to audiences formulating new meanings and uses for them. In this section, I look at more recent

rearticulations and repurposings of Bara's image, ones that I see as distinct from the examples in the prior section in being "smaller," more independent, more individualistic cultural productions, ostensibly less commercially-driven and more apt to re-present Bara as part of a politicized endeavor or individual expression.

I propose that the three examples discussed in this section function at one level as a record of variations in the prevailing ideology surrounding gender, and changing attitudes towards women, sexuality, ethno-religious difference, and the performativity of identity. Recollections and re-presentations of Bara as a Jew, a feminist, an exploited worker, an intellectual, and other personae that complicate her vamp image have helped her to seem culturally viable across multiple shifts in social history, and have extended the signifying career of her image in ways that have made it highly adaptable for new cultural productions. At another level, these works also draw upon and illustrate the more personalized or affective responses to Bara's image that have been such a crucial component of her remembrance and cultural viability.

Because of this, I regard works covered in this section as indicators of how a popular cultural text can "come back" from parody. Rather than denying or disputing prior parodies or the humor that has already been found in Bara's image, these "comebacks" address new issues and concerns in a pointed way, expressly engaging with and sometimes critiquing Bara's reception history, and the cumulative scope of multifaceted responses to her image, as a component of their repurposed meanings. As Hutcheon argues, parody of a postmodernist sensibility, rather than concealing or attempting to resolve contradictory elements within its representations, foregrounds them (90). Parody of this sort, she claims, is "fundamentally ironic and critical, not nostalgic or antiquarian in its relation to the past," and as such further denaturalizes "our assumptions about our representations of the past" (94). We must remain

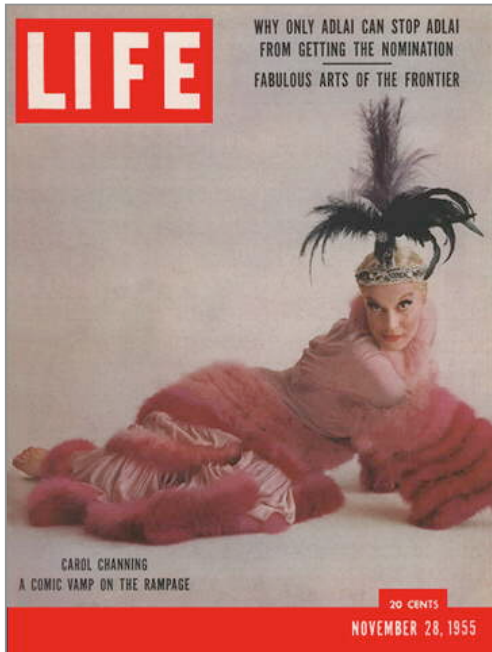


aware of the likelihood, however, that these more recent works may seem richer, more complex, more critical, and more polysemic simply because they are temporally nearer to us, and more in line with current day perspectives delivered through familiar modes of communication.

**“My Name is Theodosia, American and Kosher”: *Theda Bara and the Frontier Rabbi***

Bara’s Judaism, and the inner conflict suffered by Goodman from denying her “real self,” is the principal theme of the 1992 off-Broadway musical parody *Theda Bara and the Frontier Rabbi* (book by Jeff Hochhauser, music by Bob Johnston, lyrics by Hochhauser and Johnston). *Frontier Rabbi* was not the first time that Bara had been the subject of a theatrical parody. If one discounts the self-parody of 1920’s notorious *The Blue Flame*, Bara was being burlesqued on Broadway by the 1930s. In a one-woman production titled *Our Stage and Stars*, Dorothy Sands, described as the “supreme contemporary mistress of imitation”<sup>15</sup> presented a series of sketches built around “impersonations of famous actresses and movie queens” (Dorothy Sands scrapbook). The final act of the production, “Vampires—Then and Now,” featured Sands playing not only Bara, but Garbo and West as well. *Our Stage and Stars* ran for a mere six performances in November 1933 at the Little Theatre on Broadway.

Also preceding *Frontier Rabbi* in parodying Bara was *The Vamp*. A much more formidable production than *Our Stage and Stars*, it was only slightly more successful, playing for sixty performances on Broadway, from November 10 to December 31, 1955, at the Winter Garden Theatre. The production (book by John La Touche and Sam Locke, music by James Mundy, lyrics by La Touche) was intended as a musical extravaganza star vehicle for Carol Channing (Figure 2.11). *The Vamp*’s central conceit, of a naïve girl-next-door type molded and hyped by a Hollywood studio as an exotic seductress, resulting in a kind of self-alienation,



**Figure 2.11:** Channing, “a comic vamp on the rampage,” on the cover of *Life*, November 28, 1955.

recalls the Theda Bara/Theodosia Goodman story. Expanding on the veiled reference to Bara, the new vamp is named Delilah Modo by studio executives, and delivers lines such as “Come here, puppet,” and more tellingly, “Kiss me, you fool,” while wearing highly ornamented yet skimpy costumes reminiscent of *Cleopatra* and *Salome*. Most reviews found the production laborious and plot-heavy. Ken Mandelbaum, in his history of flop Broadway

musicals, acknowledges that “It was not a bad idea to star Channing as... a simple farm girl who allows herself to be transformed into a Theda Bara-Nita

Naldi style silent screen siren,”<sup>16</sup> but describes the production as a “big and disastrous” “one-joke affair” (59). In her autobiography, Channing writes that she knew *The Vamp* would fail, in part, because “No one with the show would ever listen to any of the reasons why *I* wanted to do the story of Theda Bara” (110).

*The Vamp*’s humorous tone and indeed many of its plot points—the heroine’s discontent with her contrived image, her clash with studio executives, her love for a cowboy movie star—seem to foreshadow and perhaps inspired *Theda Bara and the Frontier Rabbi*. The play is significantly different from earlier reuses of the Bara image, however, in its extensive re-imagining of Theodosia Goodman, “the nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati,” longing for reconnection with her Jewish roots. The passing of time has seen a growing fascination with the

ironic disconnect between Theda Bara, the exotic vamp, and nearsighted, bookish Theodosia Goodman, and the psychic toll the former takes on the latter (Figure 2.12).

*Frontier Rabbi*, along with the other works discussed in this section, are notably different from the earlier parodies in that irony appears to be a much more central component, particularly irony stemming from the deconstruction of identity. The focus on the Bara/Goodman contrast in these works presents a revisionist remembrance in which parody and irony are used to challenge presumptions about the divide between the performative and the “real.” John Fiske describes irony as reliant on a “collision between discourses”



**Figure 2.12:** Bara on the set of *Salome*

and concludes, “neither the text, nor the dominant ideology, can ever control all the potential meanings that this collision produces” (“Television” 402). The centrality of irony in these works may be a key factor in expanding horizons of expectations, acting as a kind of gateway for Bara to be reinterpreted in varying ways and repurposed for a variety of reasons. The reevaluations of Bara’s image done by these works, and their questioning of what is or is not “true” in the stories about her, extend the investigation of identity and the self beyond the limits of their respective narratives.

*Frontier Rabbi*’s clever prologue, a “screening” of a fictitious film called *Father, I Have Sinned* (a parody of *A Fool There Was*), effectively introduces Bara to a 1990s audience who may have never heard of her, using humorous exaggeration to travesty her character type and

film roles. Bara, as a bride in a tight black wedding gown, attempts to seduce a priest while her groom commits suicide; a title card announces “Only six months later!”, and the vamp has driven the priest to drunken despair—and has stolen from the poor box to boot. At the end of the onstage film, Isaac Birnbaum, a callow young rabbi, is spotted in the audience by a busybody congregant who, scandalized that her rabbi would watch a lurid Theda Bara film, shames and scolds him. To save face, the weak-willed Isaac tells her that he only came to the movie to gather material for his next sermon, a condemnation of Theda Bara and her immoral influence. Isaac, who retains a boyish fantasy of being a cowboy as well as a rabbi, frets over his hypocrisy, asking himself, “How am I supposed to tell my congregation I think Theda Bara’s obscene? I like her better than Tom Mix!”

Selwyn Farp, the head of Fox Studios, is a congregant at Rabbi Birnbaum’s synagogue, and out of a sense of obligation has hired Isaac’s sister Rachel as a wig and make-up girl at the studio. Rachel, over-excited at being assigned to do Theda Bara’s nails, accidentally hurts the supposedly foreign, non-English-speaking star, who cries out “Oy gevalt!” “Miss Bara! You speak English!” Rachel exclaims, and Bara (called by her nickname “Thea” in the play) realizes that her exotic studio-created façade is blown. Rachel reassures her that she won’t reveal the secret, and Thea, relieved to have a confidante, tells Rachel how unhappy she is, saying, “I must confess I’m so lonesome for Jewishness.” Rachel convinces Thea to come with her to *shul* (synagogue), and to meet her brother, who Rachel knows is crazy about Theda Bara. Thea refuses the “blind date”—until Rachel reveals that her brother is a rabbi.

Rachel, threatening to tell their father Isaac has been dating *shiksas* if he refuses to meet her new friend, builds her up by telling him she’s a “regular Theda Bara.” That Saturday Thea accompanies Rachel to synagogue, unrecognizable in a demure white dress and spectacles; in

fact, the stage directions indicate, “It may take a moment to realize that this is indeed the Theodosia Goodman side of Theda Bara” (Hochhauser 32). Before the service begins, Isaac and Thea spot each other, lock eyes, and are both struck by “a bolt of love.” Unfortunately, however, Isaac’s sermon is his condemnation of Theda Bara. Because of his love for movies, his delivery is particularly impassioned, and sensing that this is the first of his sermons to which the congregation is actually responsive, he gets carried away in his moralizing. Thea, mortified, leaves. Feeling further alienated from her Jewish heritage, she also wonders if her film roles have left her “damned forever by my race” (Hochhauser 43).

Isaac’s sermon has other consequences. A group of ladies of the congregation determine to organize a picket protest of Bara’s new film, *Cleopatra*, accusing the vamp of giving their teenagers “slinky attitude” and “turning men into randy apes.” The sanctimonious ladies even go so far as to sing, “Theda Bara/Gee we’re glad you’re not a Jew” (Hochhauser 44). Farp, on the other hand, sees Isaac as a perfect replacement for a conservative rabbi retiring from the film industry’s self-censoring National Review Board, whose outrage over Bara had been excellent publicity: “What that man condemns, all America wouldn’t miss!” Farp convinces the other members of the nominating committee for the Review Board— Sam Goldfish, Adolph Zukor, and “prominent Protestant” D.W. Griffith—that his rabbi would be an easily controlled puppet for the industry, as he has “passion, persuasiveness, and complete lack of moral conviction.”

On the set of *Cleopatra*, Thea’s director and leading man J. Gordon Edwards (the real director of most of Bara’s films) coaches her through a particularly racy scene in which she wears a brassiere made of grape clusters and must pluck grapes off and eat them one by one. Thea refuses, and Farp fires her. Meanwhile, Rachel, who has already berated her brother for his hypocrisy and offending her friend, is further incensed that he is considering taking the position

on the Review Board, asking him, “Since when does the ‘Frontier Rabbi’ want to censor films?” While screening *Cleopatra*, which Farp is pressuring him to denounce, Isaac unhappily sings to himself “This is not the way/ to be a rabbi/caught without conviction” and wonders “How can I be me/and be the rabbi?” (Hochhauser 81).

Pushed by their respective circumstances into identity crises, both Isaac and Thea confront themselves. Thea determines to unify the “real self” and the star persona, telling herself, “Without Theodosia, what would Theda be? Nothing!”, but also realizing that Theda Bara represents a kind of power and confidence she desires, and that she should have “vamped for herself all along” (Hochhauser 68). Isaac resolves to integrate his fantasies of being a stalwart, forthright cowboy hero who still “plays his part” even when afraid into his identity as a rabbi. Thus, at a press event where he is expected to rail against Hollywood immorality, Isaac instead comes clean about his enjoyment of Bara’s films. Thea is in attendance, and comes forward to reveal to the crowd that she speaks English and is not the sinister “magnificent animal” she’s been made out to be. The path has been cleared for a romance between Thea and Isaac, and Farp dreams up a new publicity angle: “Theda Bara embraces Judaism!”

Past reception, and what seems in retrospect its naïveté and tendency towards moral panic, is one of the predominant sources of humor in *Frontier Rabbi*. In particular, the play mocks the hypocrisy engendered by religious dogmatism. The outraged ladies of the synagogue, for instance, are in reality so star-struck when Bara appears at the press conference that they immediately pronounce her “adorable.” At the same time, the play also imagines an alternative mode of reception, one in which Bara’s Judaism is a point of promotion rather than a liability. This appears to be revisionist history of a wishful thinking vein, overlooking the anti-Semitism of the period for an untroubled happy ending. As noted in Chapter One, it’s open to debate

whether or not the 1910s moviegoing public knew of Bara's Jewish heritage. But just as Bara's Judaism, like the inescapable vamp image, may have been harmful to her popularity at one point in time, over time it has been an asset to her memorability, linking her to a specific identity and heritage that may resonate with others of the same background who would otherwise have no interest or awareness. "Entertaining America: Jews, Movies and Broadcasting," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, attests to Bara's Jewishness being a significant factor of how she has been remembered and interpreted. Running from February to September, 2003 (with an extensive accompanying catalogue and website still active as of 2013), the exhibition featured Bara in one of ten "star shrines" amidst other Jewish luminaries such as the Marx Brothers, Fanny Brice, Barbra Streisand, and Betty Boop ("Star Shrines").

While *Frontier Rabbi* received fairly positive, if not particularly enthusiastic, reviews, at least one critic singled out the play's treatment of Jewish identity as problematic, writing that too much of its humor relied on "warmed-over rehashes of tired ethnic jokes" (Grahmke). Nonetheless, Jewish identity is so much a part of the musical's depiction of Bara that it's fitting that the *Frontier Rabbi*'s January 1993 off-Broadway premiere was at the Jewish Repertory Theater in New York City (Figure 2.13). The tendency to re-imagine Bara as a victim of Hollywood exploitation, suffering under the burden of an imposed persona diametrically opposed to the "real self," is amplified by the production's location of Bara's woes in her disconnect from Jewish community and heritage. Reconnection with this heritage is shown to be personally empowering. When Thea



Figure 2.13

attends synagogue, Jewish “foremothers” emerge from stained glass windows to welcome her and serve as spiritual guides. Reconnection with Jewish tradition is shown to be the key to Thea resolving her identity crisis, giving her the strength to be true to herself rather than capitulate to studio demands: “My foremothers meant me to see/I’ll never be free/Until I disagree/No more the victim, I” (Hochhauser 68).

While the production takes pains to communicate a positive message about Jewish identity, it’s less progressive in its representation of Bara as a woman. Although it seems at times as if Hochhauser is reinterpreting Bara with at least an acknowledgment of feminism, in the play Thea finds peace with herself not necessarily through resolution of an identity crisis or defiance of studio control, but through a “coming back to the fold” in which religion, tradition, and community also appear to demand a conservatism towards gender roles and a restrictive moral code. Thea, in the musical number “There Are so Many Things that a Vampire Can’t Do,” laments that “I gave up a life to be a movie star,” and expresses regret that “Nice Jewish boys never meet girls like me” (Hochhauser 22). When Farp catches Thea at the synagogue, in violation of her contract, she threatens to make a scene by begging to stay, saying, “ All my life/I’ve lived with a dream/It may not seem worthwhile/I must have a life/My people’s respect/A date with a rabbi” (Hochhauser 35). Over the course of the production, Thea finds the strength to rebel, but the goal of her rebellion is attainment of the conventional heterosexual pairing, with little to complicate the standard happy ending for an otherwise complex character.

The gentle satire of early Hollywood and the Bara legend appears to have continued to intrigue theater patrons; the Jewish Repertory Theater’s production of *Frontier Rabbi* filled the houses in which it played (Shields), and the floundering off-Broadway venue Union Square Theater anticipated the musical comedy would be a “theatrical savior,” popular enough to “carry



the unwieldy burden” of its future (G. Evans). In spite of this, *Frontier Rabbi* is almost as evasive as Bara’s films: no cast recording was produced, and photographs from the production are elusive. The New York production had no major stars, although the cast of the February 1992 out of town tryout in Chicago featured Rachel Sweet as Thea. Sweet, who as a teenager was signed with the storied punk and New Wave record label Stiff, links Bara with the “alternative” music scene, a topic further explored in Chapter Three. Lost film is a lost *object*, though, and even “lost” theatrical works like *Frontier Rabbi* can be rediscovered and restaged, with each performance adding yet another nuance to how it will live on in memory. *Frontier Rabbi* has been revived at least once, in December 2005, at the York Theatre in New York, and one song from the musical was performed as part of a “Late Night Broadway” student production at the Western Michigan University Theatre in December 2010—a video posted online by one of the students is perhaps the only performance footage of *Frontier Rabbi*.

*Frontier Rabbi* is one of a handful of works within Bara’s intertextual surround that explores Judaism as an ethnic and cultural identity. Other aspects of identity politics have become the focal points of other parodic repurposings. As with *Frontier Rabbi*, the creators of many such parodies have attempted a “recuperation” of Bara from earlier representations, and likewise many have played up the interpretation of Bara as somehow out of step with or alienated by her life circumstances, the people around her, and her historical moment. The next two parodies under consideration make use of Bara’s image in addressing feminist identity politics, but also repurpose that image as a forum for exploring the nature of identity, the interplay between past and present, and why and how cultures remember what has come before.

### Lost but Not Forgotten: Reimagining the Past in *Theda*

Noting that in feminist art the politics of representation are inevitably about gender, Hutcheon argues that feminist artists often employ “postmodern parodic strategies” as a way of examining the history and “historical power” of cultural representations. This strategy allows feminist artworks to ironically contextualize the history and politics of representation, and by extension of gender, in such a way as to deconstruct them (98). Hutcheon’s analysis of the politics of feminist parody aptly describes *Theda* (2007) a multimedia art piece by British artist Georgina Starr (Figure 2.14).



Figure 2.14

*Theda* recalls and re-imagines Bara through the recreation of scenes from her lost films, using scripts, stills, and publicity shots for reference, but adapting them and the Bara image in such a way that Starr sees the piece as being as much a self-portrait as a representation of the “lost” star. Starr describes the initial inspiration for the piece as being the impossibility of seeing Bara’s films due to their loss or destruction (e-mail interview). According to Starr’s Website,

*Theda* in part is meant to confront this matter, and to “question ideas of loss and neglect within all art forms.” In addition, the complexity of the piece also encompasses “deception and pretence within both art and acting; the mythologising of artworks, performers and stars; the lure of vanity and obsession with possessing artists and art; and finally confronting mortality, ownership and ultimately destruction and death” (Starr, “Theda”). Bara’s image is here repurposed in such a way that cinema and cinematic acting becomes an allegory for personal identity. Loss is countered by re-creation; multiple intertextual artifacts are filtered through an individual perspective and recontextualized for new, individuated purposes. In this way,



**Figure 2.15**

Starr’s art exemplifies at a microcosmic level the kind of cultural work that is always taking place at a macrocosmic level, in which individual perspectives, media, and memory are constantly reformulating new configurations of meaning and new patterns of remembrance.

Starr's multimedia piece is comprised of a video component with an attendant artist's book, although the artist sees the piece as open to change and variation; in 2010, she exhibited *Theda* for the first time as she had originally conceived the piece, as a multi-screen installation (Figure 2.15). The cinematic component of *Theda* is in two distinct parts. The first, "Prelude," is a twelve-minute sustained close up of Starr imitating Bara by performing a "series of codified expressions" similar to Bara's "registering emotions" for publicity photos in the 1910s (Figures 2.16; 2.17). "My idea was to try articulate every emotion Bara may have expressed in the lost films," Starr explained, adding, "In one review she was called 'the woman of a 1,000 faces,' and I wanted to try convey as many facial expressions as I could in one unedited shot" (e-mail interview). Starr's Website describes the piece as the artist's face being "held hostage by the gestures and expressions she is trying so precisely to communicate," thereby "transforming what at first appears to be an acting exercise into a moving portrait of both the artist and the actress" (Starr, "Theda [Prelude]"). The self-portrait aspect of "Prelude," Starr said, is enhanced by it being what she sees as a transition between herself and full immersion into performing as Bara in the second part of the film: "I am dressed as Bara, but not as fully transformed.... I have not applied the white face paint or false fingernails and wanted to be a combination of myself and the silent performer" (e-mail interview).

In the second part of the video component, "Act," twenty minutes in length, Starr recreates scenes from several of Bara's lost films, cleverly compiled in such a way as to form a single "loose narrative." Starr said that this part of the project was created working over the course of almost a year alone in her studio, in which she "read everything I could about the characters (Bara) played and the plots and storylines she followed," recreated costumes, sets, and props based on old photographs, and filmed the piece with herself playing all the roles. She



**Figure 2.16 (above):** Georgina Starr in the “Prelude” component of *Theda*.

**Figure 2.17 (right):** Bara demonstrating her acting technique for *Motion Picture Magazine* (date unknown).



attempted to take some element, either visual or narrative, from all of Bara’s lost films, so as to “explore aspects of all the films and the characters” (e-mail interview). Indeed the photo documentation of *Theda* on her Website includes some remarkably accurate simulations of costumes, wigs, make-up, and poses from recognizable stills of *Cleopatra* and *Salome*, as well as lesser-known films.<sup>17</sup> Starr said that although she watched both *A Fool There Was* and *The Unchastened Woman* as research for her piece, the still images she uncovered had more impact on her creative process than the films: “I really enjoyed imagining Bara as a performer rather than watching her for real and wanted my performance to come from what I imagined rather than copying how she acted” (e-mail interview).

The artist’s book component of *Theda*, as Starr describes it, is meant to clarify the theoretical aspects of the piece, including the intent of its feminist intervention into Bara’s lost films. Specifically, Starr expresses an intention of examining the function of the male gaze in

order to devise ways of subverting it, of rendering it “impotent.” She does so in part by playing both a male artist and a female artist’s model in a sequence that appears to be based on either *The Eternal Sapho* (Bracken, 1916) or *The Forbidden Path* (Edwards, 1918). Starr’s discussion of this sequence demonstrates the political use of parody and humor in her work:

Much of the criticism about Bara was that she was a very male construct, the femme fatale/Eve stereotype who lures men to their destruction. I explore these themes in “Act,” but instead of having a man play the “male” artist who is eventually destroyed I played this character myself. Bara did not play male roles in any of her films, but I wanted to subvert the themes that had run through many of her movies. By placing “Theda” in the male role she is both the destroyer and the destroyed, the voyeur and the object of desire. (e-mail interview)

Starr indicated that the dual role, and the obviousness that a woman is playing the male character, might also invite audiences to question whether the piece “is presenting a man admiring a woman or is it an example of a woman discovering a passion for another woman?” (Starr, “Theda, A Performance”).

As a work that is intended in part as a self-portrait, *Theda* engages with the “personal is political” philosophy espoused by second-wave feminism, but is at once more pointed and more poignant in its feminist politics when Starr discusses the piece as also being “a portrait of my mother expressed through the mask of Theda Bara” (Starr). Starr related that she first learned of Bara through her mother, saying “I used to make-up my mother's face and she would sometimes say she looked like Theda Bara when I had finished.” Describing her mother as “an unfulfilled 1960s housewife,” Starr said she lived her “life as a performance, functioning as a happy and contented woman to the outside world,” but “behind closed doors” struggled with depression and

anxiety. On her mother performing within the narrow confines available to most women at the time, Starr said, “I would imagine my ‘made-up’ mother as a silent screen movie star and in many ways she was the first ‘actress’ I encountered” (e-mail interview). Part of the inspiration for the piece, Starr said, was glimpsing a photograph of Bara and momentarily thinking it was of her mother (*Theda: A Thousand Faces*).

In its single-screen version, *Theda* has been exhibited in London at the Prince Charles Theater, in New York at the Film Anthology Archives, both in 2007, in Tokyo, and in Berlin at Somnambule, the First International Caligari Festival, in 2010. For all but the Tokyo screening, Starr selected musicians who had not previously seen the work to provide live, improvised accompaniment.<sup>18</sup> Starr wanted an improvisational component to the screenings of *Theda* not only because it corresponded to the way many silent film accompanists of the past were expected to perform, but because the one-time-only nature of improvised music comments on what has proven to be the impermanence of so many motion pictures. “As Bara’s films have disappeared the music mirrors this by only being played that particular way just that one time,” Starr explains, adding, “Like her films it's completely ephemeral” (e-mail interview).

In addition to *Theda*’s performative, time-based components, the work’s fragmentary quality and inherent changeability—the elements that may or may not be part of a given exhibition, the variable configurations of an installation piece—also mirror the contingencies of remembering and forgetting, both cultural and personal. The sheer amount of material that has been assembled and recontextualized by the piece replicates at an intimate scale the fluctuations between media, audiences, and affect that have influenced how Bara has been interpreted and remembered. As *Theda* demonstrates, the memorability of Bara’s image corresponds not just its adaptability in reflecting or even instigating socio-political changes, but to an affective resonance

at the individual level, in which Bara becomes a conduit for exploring a wide range of personal and interpersonal matters.

### **Meeting Theda Bara in the Twenty-first Century: *A Vamp Supreme* and Youth Filmmaking**

Both *Theda Bara and the Frontier Rabbi* and *Theda* indicate how professional artists have used Bara's image in ways that expand her meaning and her relevance to personal concerns and to more recent audiences. At a broader cultural level, however, the socio-political developments that encourage acts of reinterpreting old media are perhaps even better demonstrated by the short film *A Vamp Supreme*, written, produced, filmed, and performed by thirty-four pre-teen and teenage students from the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles. The film recreates a scene from Bara's *Cleopatra*, and also portrays what the star felt about her fame and her image. Realized at a truly grassroots level of collaboration, *A Vamp Supreme* is particularly compelling because it comes from an unlikely source that demonstrates how remembrances of the Bara image are passed on, and how that image is rearticulated and repurposed by new generations of movie viewers and filmmakers.

*A Vamp Supreme* is a twelve-minute segment from *Edendale Follies*, a silent, black-and-white Super 8 film created in the spring 2007 Youth Film Workshop offered by the Film Center. The Center is a non-profit media arts organization and community-based cinema that has been running an impressive number of workshops and screenings since 2002. In its mission and its accomplishments fostering active and participatory media use, the Film Center appears to be a vibrant real world project of the kind many media and audience studies scholars theorize and advocate with great idealism.<sup>19</sup> Executive Director/Co-founder Paolo Davanzo describes the Film Center as "A safe haven where interests and ideas could be exchanged" in a "cinematic



revolution” that will offer “an alternative to the Hollywood model of success.” Through its programs, the Center seeks to provide numerous opportunities for “members of marginalized and underserved communities” to become “active, empowered participants in the creation and dissemination of experimental, documentary and narrative film in order to truly reflect the many voices and visions that make up the fabric of contemporary American life” (Davanzo).

In particular, the Film Center regards its programs as “positive catalysts for opportunities and interactions” for the community’s “at risk” youth (“EPFC”). According to Lisa Marr, the Film Center’s Operations Director and Youth Film Coordinator, youth classes are designed to be a “non-hierarchical, collaborative creative experience” in which the students are responsible for researching, writing, planning, performing, crewing, shooting and editing their projects, with each participant getting hands-on experience with the cameras and editing software (e-mail interview). The *Edendale Follies* project was devised in part to give the young participants in the Center’s program a sense of civic pride by exploring and celebrating their neighborhood’s “cinematic past.” Edendale, the former name of the Echo Park neighborhood, was one of the film industry’s earliest centers on the west coast, home to studios such as Selig, Fox, and Keystone. “Since the earliest ‘Hollywood’ film studios started literally just down the street from the Film Center,” Marr said, “in this instance cinema history IS neighborhood history” (e-mail interview).<sup>20</sup>

A project focused on the area’s neglected past was deemed a “perfect subject for a youth class,” Marr reported, in part because the Center felt it was “crucial for students to understand cinematic history in order to provide a context for their own work as filmmakers.” The resulting film is a combined remembrance, recreation, and re-imagining of the early Hollywood film industry. *Edendale Follies* opens with a montage of still images, contrasting present-day photos

of spots around the neighborhood with images of the same areas as they were in the early twentieth century. In addition to the section on Bara, the narrative parts of the film include an irreverent reenactment of the rise, fall, and fatal car crash of cowboy star Tom Mix, who's depicted as a mean drunk abusive to his horse Tony; and a slapstick comedy, complete with pie throwing, in which an escaped bear and the Keystone Kops disrupt a party attended by Charlie Chaplin, Mabel Normand, Roscoe Arbuckle, Gloria Swanson, and Juanita Hansen.

None of the student filmmakers, according to Marr, had ever heard of Bara before the class.<sup>21</sup> When asked whether the young filmmakers were resistant to making work about old film stars they did not know, she replied, "No, they all loved it," noting "We invited the students to look behind the curtain and examine the stories behind the stories." Old films and stars are thus reinvigorated through the students' reinterpretation of them in films of their own, making them relevant to their own perspectives. In this way, the students have become not only makers of meaning, but also preservationists of both local memory and film history. The complexity of the *Vamp Supreme* segment of the project clearly demonstrates that its makers did extensive research not only into *Cleopatra*, but also into Bara's image, publicity, and offscreen character as well. Marr said that several guest lecturers aided the students in this aspect of the project, including a woman who had been Bara's neighbor as a child, and displayed some of the original costumes and accessories used in her films.<sup>22</sup>

Marr also said that the fact that Bara's *Cleopatra* is a lost film "absolutely" influenced the decision to build a project around it. In recreating a sequence from *Cleopatra*, the makers of *A Vamp Supreme* had access to the original screenplay, which was then used as the shooting script for the re-creation. While this in itself is significant in terms of the preservation and recirculation of the lost film and Bara's image, what makes the film particularly useful as a case

study is what it conveys about the young filmmakers' resourcefulness in finding relevance in films and stars of a century ago. *Cleopatra*'s lostness not only gave the filmmakers free reign to imagine the film through re-creation, but also the opportunity to comment on film history and preservation. Recalling the many apocryphal tales of lost films being rediscovered in unlikely locations, as well as the *Blair Witch Project*-style premise of uncovered found footage, introductory title cards in *A Vamp Supreme* inform the audience that they will see, for the first time in seventy years, "fragments of the lost classic *Cleopatra*, complete with behind-the-scenes footage from the production," which had been discovered by construction workers digging at the site of the former Fox Studio in Echo Park.

The recreated *Cleopatra* footage is not the only interesting aspect of *A Vamp Supreme*, and in fact I find the framing narrative bookending the recreation more indicative of the dynamics of repurposing. This framing device, a character study of the psychological conflict experienced by Theodosia Goodman over the incongruity of her treacherous, man-killing image, shows how the young filmmakers have recontextualized film history and star image in a way that speaks to twenty-first century youth. Following the explanatory title cards about the rediscovered footage, *A Vamp Supreme* opens on a painted backdrop of desert palms and pyramids. Stagehands arrange props, and a young, dark-haired woman introduces herself via title cards as Theodosia Burr Goodman. With much on-set activity behind her, she looks over a script; a second title card reads "But they call me Theda Bara." As preparations for shooting *Cleopatra* carry on, and the star is costumed and made-up by studio assistants, the title cards convey Bara/Goodman's seemingly rueful internal monologue, which simultaneously provides the audience with some basic information about Bara (the publicity-created persona, the anagrammatic name) and reveals her ambivalence about her trumped-up alter ego:

I am a Jewish girl from Cincinnati.... But they say I am French and Egyptian, born in the Sahara Desert. I am the daughter of a tailor.... They say I am the daughter of an Arabian princess. They say I have supernatural powers.... The accent, the dark clothing, the exotic lifestyle...it is all just an act.

Throughout this passage, Bara appears by turns bored and melancholic, or smiling and effusive as she is fussed over by assistants. From a medium shot of Bara standing alone,



**Figure 2.18**

unsmiling and somber, the film cuts to a title card reading, with ironic incongruity, “I am the biggest star in Hollywood!” The next shot, an extreme close-up of Bara’s face looking equally unhappy but now exotically made-up and framed by extravagant earrings, is followed by the line, “But no one knows who I really am.”

The camera pulls back to reveal Bara in a shimmering, form-fitting gown and bejeweled

Pharaoh’s collar, looking conspicuously dejected in spite of the glamour (Figure 2.18).

A shot of one of the actual poster designs for *Cleopatra* signals the transition to the recreation, in which Cleopatra is confronted by the Roman general Ventidius about Egypt’s rebellion against Rome, voyages to Tarsus on the royal barge, and has her first meeting with Mark Antony (Figure 2.19), who within moments has fallen to one knee, exclaiming “I am ready to sacrifice wife, empire, friends, for a single kiss.” A title card reading “This is a true story” marks the transition back to Bara/Goodman’s “real life,” where she relates one of the most familiar and frequently reprinted publicity stories designed to paint Bara as a misunderstood

“good woman.” While walking in the city, Bara sees a ragged, hungry-looking little girl on the street (Figure 2.20). Bara approaches the child to give her an apple, but the girl’s smile turns to an expression of abject terror. “It’s the vampire!” she manages to gasp before fleeing from the hurt and



**Figure 2.19**

confused Bara. *Edendale Follies* recreates this scenario, using the same wording as the original 1916 press report. Bara, standing alone and forlorn as stagehands strike the Egyptian desert set behind her, tells the audience “I want to play a kind-hearted, lovable, human woman” and asks “Won’t someone write me such a part?” (Figure 2.21).



**Figure 2.20**

The role of the film star as laborer, according to Paul McDonald, is an under-examined aspect of star studies. The filmmakers’ choice to interpret Bara as an unhappy worker in Hollywood’s industry reinforces the perhaps more cynical, perhaps more pragmatic tone of the film. Depictions of Bara as a misunderstood “good woman” who was also a misused worker have a long history. At the height of her career, a number of fans responded sympathetically to what they saw as Bara’s unfair

treatment by the film industry, and by audiences too dim to recognize her “wickedness” as a role played by an actress.<sup>23</sup> Bara (or disguised publicists) was not above painting herself as the victim,<sup>24</sup> and as her career waned, the press seemed inclined to agree. One magazine writer admonished other Hollywood stars, saying they “ought to give Theda Bara a vote



**Figure 2.21**

of thanks” for being the industry scapegoat: “With only one or two protests, she has shouldered more abuse and more unthinking criticism than any other player, and the rest ought to realize that if there hadn’t been any Theda, they might have been the victims” (Foley). By 1936, moviegoers, too, were being asked, “Would you take \$4000 a week to be hated by women and feared by little children?” (Brenner). In spite of her plea for an escape to typecasting, the film concludes with the young woman playing Bara smiling, laughing, and looking offscreen. This ambiguous ending reflects Hutcheon’s contention that postmodern parody resists providing audiences with a “dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction” (192). *A Vamp Supreme*’s somber tone is somewhat alleviated, but by no means undone, by Bara’s smile. The audience is left wondering what happens next, but the fact that many in that audience might never have heard of Bara before, or might not have considered the fact that films can be “lost,” tells its own story about how the past may be forgotten—and in a few cases, rediscovered.

*Edendale Follies* debuted at an outdoor screening and potluck dinner in Echo Park in late May 2007. Marr describes the event as “truly one of those rare magical evenings that people talk

about as being one of their all-time favorites.” She also said that “it seemed like the entire community was in attendance”—not just the students and their families, but “friends, filmmakers, silent film buffs, historians, activists, local homeless people and the entire Echo Park Fire Department,” who had “parked the trucks nearby in case they got a call during the screening.” To recreate the silent film experience, live music for the screening was provided by the late Bob Mitchell, described by Marr as “the legendary silent film accompanist who began playing in 1924 at the age of 12.” The audio for the DVD of *Edendale Follies* was recorded at that screening, and along with Mitchell’s organ accompaniment, the audience’s enthusiastic responses are clearly audible, heightening the sense of community spirit captured by the student filmmakers. This screening, along with the film festivals where *Edendale Follies* has played, amplifies the impact the Center’s students have had on shaping interpretation and remembrance of early film history.<sup>25</sup>

That this interpretation and remembrance emerge from the perspective of twenty-first century youth is significant in demonstrating how context-based intonations color cultural memory. The student filmmakers’ reimagining of film history and old Hollywood legends is notably short on sentimentality, glamour, or perpetuation of the standard myths, instead exploring the darker aspects of celebrity, such as the focus on Mix’s alcoholism and drunk driving death. One could speculate on the influence of cultural or temporal differences on interests and attitudes, or whether the outlook of these young people represents a postmodern irony and cynicism. I see a more relevant point of analysis, however, in Marr’s comment that the young women in the class, who she describes as “really smart and thoughtful,” were “fascinated by (Bara’s) personal story and the sense of alienation she felt as a cog in the Hollywood machine.”

As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, female audiences from the 1910s to the present have been particularly responsive to Bara's image. Through idiosyncratic readings, women have found in that image a forum for evaluating notions of "correct" or "incorrect" femininity in specific social constructs, sometimes finding use value in Bara and the vamp for countering patriarchal regulation. The interest the young women in the class had about the duality of Bara's persona prompted an examination in their film of how culturally or institutionally imposed identities, like Bara's star image, can be a form of oppression. This interest may have to do in part with the filmmakers' age and being at a life stage in which one may be keenly, even painfully, aware of a sense of self "in progress," physically, emotionally, and intellectually. In this sense, the focus on Bara's existential angst may reflect the particular concerns of an age group in which the matter of "Who am I?" becomes a central developmental issue, and may cause the subject to feel misunderstood or at odds with her or his environment. In a culture in which the platitude "just be yourself" is often presented as sage advice, it may be refreshingly forthright for young people to encounter an example like Bara that illustrates the dilemma of identity construction and performance.

The concept of identity as constructed and performative may also have been communicated to the filmmakers by "getting to know" Bara (and other celebrities of the past), as both an old movie star and a person, through a process of assemblage, collecting bits of information and images, forming impressions, and in this case doing so collaboratively. While this is not to make a case that a conscious poststructuralist, post-queer theory deconstruction of identity is at work, it is to suggest that similar ideas, as they are specifically tied to popular culture and the mass media, are being put into action. Regardless of any allegiance to notions of a postmodernist sensibility, the generation represented by the Center's students would probably



not find the idea that a sense of self is often determined through a complex network of tastes and interests (and social performances of those tastes and interests) very startling or challenging, for this may simply describe already familiar “on the ground” practices. The way that the filmmaking project calls upon the students to direct awareness to matters of identity and performance, and to the possibility of purposeful intervention into such matters, reflects the Center’s stated goals and mission of fostering its participants in the process of becoming “active, empowered participants” able to diversifying the range of voices heard in the media.

Along the same lines, much of *A Vamp Supreme* functions as a quite sophisticated interrogation of truth versus artifice, of the distinctions between “real” and fabricated being far more complicated than they initially appear, and of the potential to locate something like truth in the interstices of discourse. It is unclear whether the title card reading “This is a true story” refers back to the preceding story of Cleopatra, or whether it signals that the upcoming story, of Bara frightening a child, is true. The fact that Bara in the latter sequence is still costumed as Cleopatra further calls into question what one can or should believe when presented with something ostensibly “true.”

This interrogation manifests itself in ways beyond the narrative focus on the clash between Bara’s star image and the person behind it, beyond even denaturalizing the myths of Hollywood and the conventions of cinematic storytelling, to mapping the locale of “truth” in an everyday context. Although the DIY aesthetic of painted cardboard sets, thrift store costumes, and location shooting is a condition of lack of budget, it also, according to Marr, was used purposefully as a kind of distancing device, as another way of “exploring the story behind the story,” thus sharing an intent with avant-garde cinema of “bringing attention to the process of filmmaking itself” through illusion-breaking elements as a denial of realism (e-mail interview).

For instance, throughout the film cameras are often positioned so that the area beyond the painted backdrop is in frame, and the ongoing daily life of the Echo Park neighborhood is visible in the background, becoming part of the action (such as when a bicyclist whizzes by while chained prisoners plead for their lives with a spear-wielding Mark Antony). This formal choice situates the cinematic-historical within the mundane neighborhood space, at once familiarizing the past and defamiliarizing the present.

Although atypically self-aware of its intervention into cultural memory, *A Vamp Supreme* exemplifies the construction of what I have called *revisionist memory*—a remembrance that re-narrativizes the past to represent the untold or forgotten stories, with added meaning contributed by the emotive or affective aspects of that retelling. In this instance, the young filmmakers, working collaboratively to shape and record ways in which their neighborhood would be reinterpreted and remembered, further influenced cultural memory by collaboratively reinterpreting and remembering old films, studios, directors, and stars that played a part in their neighborhood's history. Through their exploration of filmmaking, film history, their community, and the interconnections between them, they found new stories to tell. In telling these stories, the filmmakers have created a historical record—not just of the past they explore, but of how one era views another. As a mediated remembrance of the past, *A Vamp Supreme* records its own present day outlooks, concerns, and opinions for future viewers.

The use of parody as the favored mode of communication supports the film's role as a revisionist memory, conveying a significant amount of information about the filmmakers' perspectives, and what they deem interesting or important enough about both past and present to isolate and critique. Parody in this case functions both as a kind of metanarrative, telling the story of how we have come to know a particular version of Bara's image, and as a dialectic,

revealing different strands of remembrance, narrative, and recontextualization for audiences to weave into differing iterations of meaning. The same can be said for all the parodies analyzed in this chapter, but *A Vamp Supreme* in particular indicates the capability of “everyday people” (particularly when equipped with a high degree of media literacy) to tell their own stories, influence cultural memory, and access a useable past.

These smaller-scale productions explored here may have a more limited reach in terms of audience numbers, but may also have a more meaningful and lasting impact on the people they *do* reach. Communicating at a more personal, or more focused, niche-oriented level, these works model for their audiences ways of intervening into media culture through repurposing, and of contributing to the meanings of popular cultural artifacts. Further, the “grassroots” origins of these works demonstrate how parody can be an intervention into the way things are remembered, and how it therefore becomes a means of drawing out revisionist memories and accessing alternative histories.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have made the case that parodies of Bara have been perhaps the most significant mnemonic strategy for preserving her in cultural memory. As Erb points out, parodies may actually *replace* knowledge or experience of an unknown or unavailable original. As such, I contend that parody has been a development essential to Bara’s retention in cultural memory—not to mention the various forms of repurposing audiences have wrested from her image. Because parody depends on allusion to other texts in order for it to “work,” and because it so often invites readings against the grain of those texts, it is a particularly vital mode of remembrance.

But the numerous parodic representations, reimaginings, and repurposings of Bara and the vamp covered in this chapter are not merely mnemonic devices, but have also served as important interpretive opportunities for audiences, then and now. If Bara had been forgotten after her film career, as she very easily could have been, it is highly unlikely she would now be anything more than a quirky footnote in film history rather than the still viable, albeit cult-oriented, polyvalent signifier that I argue she has become. Because it requires audiences to read texts on multiple levels simultaneously, engage with an intertextual array of allusions, and form evaluative impressions of the works under consideration, parody invites open-ended responses, and effectively extends texts' range of meanings. As examined here, parodies of Bara have been the impetus for many other acts of repurposing, the basis for new works, and the means for producing cultural commentary across a range of contexts.

Ranging across contexts points out another use of parody explored in this chapter: these parodies have not only been a way of remembering Bara, but of retaining the memory of many other things, including things that may not be recorded elsewhere. Through its intertextual nature, parody becomes a sort of archive, holding and preserving traces of at least one other text, while inevitably pulling into its orbit other works and other remembrances. In addition, the parodies explored in this chapter document how social, cultural, political, and historical developments have impacted the already complex interrelation of memory, intertextuality, and affect. In this way, Bara's continuing cultural presence becomes less as a matter of what the star-as-text communicates than a matter of the contingencies shaping the relationship between that text and its readers. Erb makes the important observation that parodies reveal which aspects of a cultural texts are "most frequently activated," thereby shedding light on how the recurring elements may have been "shaped or reconstituted to meet the needs of particular audience

groups” (163). The eroticism and exoticism of Bara’s image that fueled earlier parodies are still central components of more recent parodies, but increasingly have been relegated to “supporting roles” for more focused explorations of gender roles, the normalization of sexual desire, constructing and performing both cultural and personal identity, and the influence of commercial media. For all of these reasons, parody is a particularly productive area of exploration for reception studies.

As I also have argued, parody is not just a mode of remembering the past, but of repurposing the past. In some cases, that repurposing grants access to elements of the past useful to current-day audiences, including historically marginalized audiences. If, as I contend, parodic repurposings of Bara’s image have the potential not just to reflect but to influence social change, one of the questions worth further examination is the possible impact the more recent parodies might have. Although by no means unproblematic or entirely progressive, the humorous intonation and less moralizing, less naïve representations of sex in the West, Monroe, and Cher parodies of Bara can be seen as a small part of a larger social development in which female sexuality has been normalized rather than censured. While the more recent parodies also touch on these issues, for the most part they appear more committed to uncovering the hidden, overlooked, or untold aspects of Bara’s image and career, and to reimagining and recreating what has been lost or forgotten. Through this commitment, they have transformed alternative histories and revisionist memories into art.

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that the question still remains as to what socio-political ramifications parodic rearticulations of Bara’s image may have, and what ideological perspectives her image’s reappearances have the capacity to foster. While this chapter has initiated the investigation into this question, subsequent chapters engage in a more focused look

at specific fan/audience interactions with Bara's image in order to draw out further answers. Bara, who in 1933 seemed acquiescent to being either remembered as a relic or forgotten entirely, could not anticipate the rich and varied ways new fans, generations after her death, would impart new life to her vamp.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick L. Collins, "Great Mysteries of the Movies: The Mystery of the Vanishing Vampire," *The New Movie Magazine*, March 1933, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Referred to as such in the 2006 documentary *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes*.

<sup>3</sup> The online forum posting about "Meeting Theda Bara" does not indicate the source of the review, only that it is from July 8, 1918. The posting does, however, include the text of the review, which gives an indication of the plot of the lost cartoon: "Jeff inherits a fortune and Mutt decides that they are going to become motion picture producers. Their aim is to obtain the services of a vampire. This ambition is inspired after Mutt and Jeff have seen Theda Bara in a picture. Jeff's admiration for Miss Bara leads him to serve notice on Mutt that any 'vamping' to be done in their pictures must be done by Miss Bara. The pair go about obtaining the services of Miss Bara in a scientific manner, and the adventures that befall them are said to make the picture the funniest this comedy pair have yet appeared in" (F. Fox).

<sup>4</sup> The illustration on the poster further suggests something of the cartoon's content. Jeff, the shorter of the two characters, stands on both a barrel and a crate to meet the flirtatious gaze of Bara, in costume for *Carmen* and framed within what could either be a window or a film screen. Holding a ukulele as if to serenade the star, the dapper little man offers her a small red heart in his open palm and exclaims "Oh! You vampire." Mutt, meanwhile, springs from the sidewalk in surprise, awe, or desire, his hat shooting up from his head.

<sup>5</sup> According to Richard Koszarski, a "rehabilitation" of the reputation of these films and their stars wouldn't occur until the 1960s. Koszarski regards the "tumultuous reception" which Buster Keaton's films received at the 1965 Venice Film Festival as the impetus which helped "trigger a wholesale reassessment of the entire silent era, a period that had suffered as much as (Keaton) had from many years of patronization and neglect" (304).

<sup>6</sup> No source, no date. Theda Bara clippings file, 1930-39. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

<sup>7</sup> No source, no date. Theda Bara clippings file, 1930-39. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division. Although Paramount attempted to coax Bara out of retirement, she reportedly asked for a prohibitively high salary.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Bara related a humorous example of this. "It always surprises me so much," Bara told the interviewer, "to have a perfectly grown woman mince up to me and murmur patronizingly 'Oh, yes, I remember going to see you when I was a little girl.'" Bara, with characteristic wit, said she responded

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with “Wait a minute and I’ll introduce you to my youngest great grandchild” (Dixon, “Theda Bara Will Desert Vamp’s Wiles for Comedy”).

<sup>9</sup> The feature was printed in multiple sources, all of which retained a nostalgic tone about Bara as an icon of the silent screen, and all of which included Bara relating that she still received numerous fan letters asking her to do another film, and that she was toying with the idea of “doing a talkie.”

<sup>10</sup> In actuality, Bara’s final professional stage appearance had been nine years earlier in an adaptation of Robert Smythe Hichens’s 1909 play *Bella Donna* produced by the Little Theatre of Beverly Hills for Professionals (Genini 113). Both Genini and Golden’s biographies indicate that Bara received generally positive, if not glowing, reviews that were “warmly nostalgic” (Golden 226).

<sup>11</sup> The episode “How Jack Found Mary,” originally broadcast October 31, 1954 (adapted from a May 1945 radio episode), made reference to Bara in an emasculating comic insult. Jack Benny, attempting to flirt with Mary Livingstone, approaches her with an exaggerated sashaying swagger, prompting her to remark to a friend, “Look, he’s walking like Theda Bara!” Thanks to Josh Vasquez for alerting me to the Bara reference on *The Jack Benny Program*.

<sup>12</sup> According to a Website dedicated to Berle, the comedian had quipped that during an appearance at an early experimental television station in Chicago in 1929, he was made to wear black lipstick to compensate for the effects of the glaring fluorescent lighting, and “looked like Pola Negri or Theda Bara” (“Biography”).

<sup>13</sup> Because many of the kinescopes of *Your Show of Shows* were discarded by NBC, it’s likely this episode is lost (“Your Show of Shows”).

<sup>14</sup> *Fractured Flickers*, produced through Desilu Productions by animator Jay Ward (better known as the creator of Bullwinkle and cohort) aired in syndication from 1961 to 1963. In his study of locally-produced children’s television programming, Tim Hollis describes another syndicated format called *Snicker Flickers*, which was picked up in a number of markets across the country in the mid-1960s and incorporated into local after-school broadcasts. In these, “the host would make up dialogue and sound effects to go with old silent movies that had yet to be recognized for their importance in film history” (Hollis 177).

<sup>15</sup> Theda Bara clippings file, undated file. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

<sup>16</sup> Part of *The Vamp*’s promotion included reports that “exotic former siren” Naldi, “the symbol of everything passionate and evil on the silent screen,” had been hired as “a kind of adviser, aide de camp, critic and coach” to ensure that Channing was “flawlessly vampish, beguiling and pleasingly unwholesome” (Talese).

<sup>17</sup> Among the films Starr mentioned referencing are *The Kreuzer Sonata* (Brenon, 1915), *The Clemenceau Case* (Brenon, 1915), *The Devil’s Daughter* (Powell, 1915), *Lady Audley’s Secret* (Farnum, 1915), *The Serpent* (Walsh, 1916), *The Eternal Sapho* (Bracken, 1916), *Madame Du Barry* (Edwards, 1917), *The Tiger Woman* (Bellamy, Edwards, 1917), and *The Forbidden Path* (Edwards, 1918). Starr said she also referenced other silent-era actresses and characters in *Theda*, including Alla Nazimova, Valeska Suratt, Louise Glaum, Marguerite Clark, and Musidora’s character Irma Vep from Louis Feuillade’s *Les Vampires* (1915).

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<sup>18</sup> Accompanying musicians have been The London Improvisers Orchestra, humansacrifice quintet in New York, and singer and composer Sigune von Osten in Berlin.

<sup>19</sup> According to its Website, the Film Center empowers its community by providing space as a neighborhood microcinema, offering free and nominal cost education programs, making filmmaking equipment available for rental, operating “a green-energy mobile cinema & film school,” and assisting non-professional filmmakers in having their works shown in film festivals (“EPFC”).

<sup>20</sup> According to explanatory text in *Edendale Follies*, Colonel William Selig established the first permanent motion picture studio in Los Angeles in Edendale in 1909. Other studios followed, and in 1917 William Fox purchased Selig’s studio to begin production on *Cleopatra*.

<sup>21</sup> According to Marr, most of the students had at least *heard* of Charlie Chaplin, however—itsself an interesting indication of the effects of textual shifters and canonicity.

<sup>22</sup> Other guest speakers Marr named include author Andrea Richards, who provided information on women in early Hollywood, Hugh Munro Neely, the co-writer, producer, and director of the Bara documentary *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes* (discussed Chapter Four), documentary writer and director Philip Dye, who has been working on a still recreation of *Cleopatra* (discussed Chapter Four), and a local geocacher who conducted a tour of the neighborhood’s former film sites.

<sup>23</sup> Some of these fan objections could even take a feminist angle. One newspaper, estimating that in 1916 more amateur poetry was being written about Bara “than any other subject in the world except ‘Spring,’” published “The Vampire’s Reverie (in Honor of Miss Theda Bara)” by Adele K. Smith of Lancaster, Pennsylvania—empathetic verse that includes the passage

Men call me wicked, false and cruel,  
And think me but a curse;  
They say I’m Satan’s mighty tool  
And could not be much worse

They judge me by the parts I play,  
Which do not flatter me;  
But I shall prove to them some day  
How good I, too, can be (“Theda Bara Fans”)

<sup>24</sup> For instance, Bara told one interviewer, “In the four and a half years I worked for William Fox I did eight or nine plays a year. Often, in summer, the temperature in the studio was more than one hundred degrees. In heat like that, I sometimes had to wear heavy furs and velvet. And in such rôles as ‘Salome,’ the mere weight of the jewels I wore would make me so exhausted that I would come home, drop into a chair without even taking off my make-up, and cry from sheer fatigue” (Mullet 99).

<sup>25</sup> Since its initial screening, Marr reported that *Edendale Follies* has shown at the NUFF Global Film Festival in Tromsø, Norway, at youth film workshops in rural Ukraine, the Halifax Pop Explosion, plus local screenings for libraries, schools, and youth groups.



## Chapter Three

### The Return of the Vampire: Goth, Identity, and the “Why” of Remembrance

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*Black hair piled high, chalk white face pierced with those truly amazing eyes & covered from stem to stern, chin to knuckles by a black chiffon dress, under this & enhanced by the shadowy fabric she wore an armor of jewels.... She was dramatic, perhaps eccentric, but she stays in my mind, all other descriptions fitting & otherwise aside, as a "fabulous being."*

—K. Southworth<sup>1</sup>

In Fall 2010, I was teaching a course on film at Indiana University. During the obligatory round of introductions that characterize the first day of the semester, I mentioned to my class that I was a graduate student in the process of writing a dissertation about a film star from the silent era named Theda Bara. Before I had the chance to indulge my curiosity by asking “Has anyone ever heard of her?”, the question that has become a standard inquiry in the years I’ve been working on this project, a young woman in the front row with lilac-colored hair, facial piercings, and multiple tattoos exclaimed, “I love her!” I downplayed my own excitement: not only was I going to have at least one student somewhat on my wavelength in the class, but my supposition that Bara *is* still remembered had been, to some degree, affirmed. “And no one else has heard of her?”, I asked the other twenty-six students in the class, with no response. Turning in her seat and briefly scanning the room, the young Bara enthusiast remarked, “That’s because there aren’t any other goths in here.”<sup>2</sup>

As well as providing a pithy anecdote, the student’s observation returns us to the central question of this dissertation—namely, *how* and *why* Bara has been held in cultural memory. And it does so in a way that indicates a crucial component of the answer: the mutually constructive interrelation of popular culture, memory, taste, affect, and identity. In the previous chapter, I

made the case that intertextuality and parody not only contribute to remembrance, but also expand the potential for audience interpretation to take the unexpected, idiosyncratic forms that allow a figure from the past like Bara to adapt to cultural changes. While that investigation largely addressed the *how* of remembrance, this chapter is more concerned with the *why* of remembrance.

The “why” as well as the “how” of remembrance raises complicated and contentious questions about the reasons some media artifacts survive the passage of time while others are forgotten. Trying to gauge those reasons leads to other questions, about why audiences like what they like; how media consumers make choices that either follow or defy prevailing tastes; why some become fans rather than merely spectators; and what various forms of fans’ beliefs and behaviors mean in terms of cultural work. I address these matters with a sustained focus on one instance of “grassroots” adaptive repurposing by examining use as well as remembrance of Bara’s star image within the goth subculture. I argue that the kinds of repurposing of the Bara image connected with goth exemplify a form of identity work, in which acts of reworking and reimagining historical cultural artifacts augment individual and collective identity, and are valued as modes of self-determined differentiation and distinction. By framing fan use of Bara’s image as a form of identity work, my primary intent is to examine how the adaptation and repurposing of the star image can also become an act of repurposing the *self*, through the cultivation and display of goth characteristics including taste, affect, and self-differentiation.

In examining the frequent concurrence of present day Bara fandom with a “gothic” sensibility, I investigate how certain intersections of taste and affect contribute resources to the process of making sense of one’s self and of one’s relation to the world, and how this influences ongoing use of popular culture. Through a three-part analysis of the recirculation of Bara’s

stardom in the goth subculture, I regard her attractiveness to a gothic sensibility as a case study in how images survive and thrive in vastly different contexts; as such, this chapter focuses on audiences making use of popular culture. First, I will analyze taste and affect as they relate to the construction and performance of individual and social identities, and how both contribute to Bara's appeal and use value for goths. By way of exploring the cultural circumstances that have made Bara's image available for successive acts of repurposing, I then examine two of the primary modes of mediated remembering pertinent to goth fandom: Bara's connections to the horror genre, and the revitalization of her image in "countercultural" youth movements, particularly those connected with rock music. Interviews I conducted with current-day fans of Bara who were drawn to her by the gothic aspects of her image will then provide further insight into the reception and purposeful reuse of her image.

### **Dark Enchantment: Bara's Appeal to Goth**

Goth originated in the early 1980s when it splintered from its parent subculture, punk.<sup>3</sup> In large part the goth movement abandoned punk's political critique and anti-aestheticism, with glamour, mystique, and frequently eroticism taking their place. Catherine Spooner describes goth as "a hybrid of spectacular and fan subcultures" that is "dependent not only on dramatic sartorial style but also on 'poaching' or rewriting other narratives, those of Gothic literature and film" (151). As with the Gothic literary genre, the goth subculture typically reflects a fascination with the past and with "dark" subjects such as death, decadence, the supernatural, madness, the return of the repressed, femmes fatales, and vampires, as well as irony, parody, melodrama, and black humor. Perceptions of goth as an anti-social/socially disruptive movement that glamorizes depression,

suicide, violence, sadomasochism, and the occult have generated waves of moral panic with some outside the subculture who interpret goth's "dark" interests as anti-Christian or satanic.<sup>4</sup>

The stereotypical image of contemporary "goths" calls to mind visions of dramatic, sometimes faux-period, black clothing, fetish gear, hair dyed black or unnatural colors, piercings, tattoos, and "'vamp' make-up for both sexes" (Spooner 96). These outward trappings ostensibly reflect a depressive, cynical, "doom and gloom" outlook that's also part of the goth stereotype—an assumption both claimed and disavowed by goths themselves.<sup>5</sup> Although this outward display of affect has been referred to as "an attitude of cultivated angst" (Wilkins 31), it is also understood to be a defiance and rejection of "normality": the website *Goth.Net* states, "Most goths become goths because they have been spurned by 'normal' society because the way they want to live their lives does not fit in with how most people are told to live theirs" (PreZ). Despite goth's purported rebellion against conventionality, it is a distinctly bourgeois, predominantly white subculture, with its adherents typically displaying the privilege of class and education, and with the disposable income needed for the not inconsiderable expenses of gothic fashions and accoutrements.<sup>6</sup>

While goth has been written off by some as the rebellious identity one can purchase (at a sizeable markup) from the Hot Topic chain store at the local mall, it may be looked at differently in light of recent fan studies scholarship that seeks to move beyond the automatic presumption that fans' consumption of commercial product is only ever harmful. Matt Hills, for instance, introduces the concept of "performative consumption" as a way to "hold open the matter of agency" without regarding "fans as dupes whose belief in their own agency is mistaken." The idea of performative consumption also prevents fandom from being reduced "to an iterated and repeated discourse in which the fan agent vanishes altogether" (*Fan* 159). Performative

consumption is a useful idea in that it locates the meaning of consumption practices not in hidebound ideological judgment, but rather in the cultural dynamic in which the consumer finds him or herself as a result of their actions. Digital artifacts, as discussed in the next chapter, also mean that consumption may be increasingly independent of economic capital and the marketplace. Just as performative consumption presents a more complicated, open-ended means of analyzing fan practices, goth also indicates the indeterminate nature of cultural dynamics. According to Spooner, goth “can be progressive or conservative, nostalgic or modern, political or apolitical, feminine or masculine, erudite or trashy, transcendently spiritual or doggedly material, sinister or silly.” Ultimately, it is difficult to determine what goth “is like,” she concludes, because “it does all these things so well” (156).

In addition to frequently being labeled cinema’s first sex symbol, Bara is sometimes referred to as “the first goth,” as in a 2011 *New York Times Magazine* feature (Scott) and a YouTube video tribute, which earned its fourteen-year-old creator an onslaught of correction and chastisement from commentators over the designation (SirRiehl). Regardless of whatever place she may take in goth history, Bara has indeed become an iconic figure for some goths through her vampy/vampire-ish look (Figure 3.1), exaggerated eroticism, eccentricity, mystique, and what’s been interpreted as the feminist aspects of her image (these same qualities have spurred goth interest in other silent-era female stars, such as Nita Naldi, Pola Negri, Louise Brooks, and Brigitte Helm, although to a lesser extent). For instance, on a discussion board about “goth actresses” on the website Gothic.net, Bara’s name is at the top of the thread initiator’s list, followed by other “darkly inclined vamps” of the silent era like Naldi, Negri, and Musidora (Blackthorne). A couple of informants to the thread enthusiastically expressed their affection for Bara and her inclusion on the list. Elsewhere on the site, gloomdolly13 proclaims, “I love Theda



**Figure 3.1**

Bara, she was indeed a very goth woman.” Numerous popular culture referents continue to link Bara’s image to goth interests, from her resemblance to Edward Gorey’s drawings of Edwardian mystery ladies, to the supposition that she inspired the character Death in Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* series of graphic novels

(“Biography for Theda”), to

allusions in horror films and the goth music scene, as explored in this chapter.

Initially, participants in an “alternative” music and style-oriented youth subculture like goth embracing a film star largely forgotten by mainstream audiences seems like a cultural incongruity. Far from being exceptional, however, this is just a particularly visible case of how a text’s capacity to be repurposed keeps artifacts circulating in discourse and therefore active in cultural memory. In this way, Bara’s appeal to a goth sensibility demonstrates that factors altogether alien to or unanticipated by a text’s original context of production and reception can serve as temporal throughways. As a spectacular subculture, moreover, goth is highly recognizable as a social phenomenon, therefore its remembrance and recycling of Bara’s image is also more conspicuous than it might be in other, less showy groups such as cinephiles or academics.

Analyzing the ways she has been repurposed in the specific context of goth not only indicates the range of meanings Bara might offer fans, but also shows how star images become forums of cultural dialogue through the dynamism of audience interaction. Numerous cultural observers have analyzed what the recirculation and recycling of popular cultural tropes and images indicate socially and politically. George Lipsitz, for instance, contends that in examining the reworking of myths in popular culture, “what changes over time is often more important than what stays the same” (*Time* 165), as those changes indicate cultural and political conditions that shape reader and text alike. Examining popular culture through a similar lens, John Fiske writes that the “meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation, not in their texts,” and that texts must be considered through “their interrelationships with other texts and with social life,” since this is how they retain signification in cultural discourse (*Reading* 4). Greil Marcus determines that images, ideas, and types recur because the passage of time amplifies the inclination to “scavenge” the past for legitimization. “Every new manifestation in culture rewrites the past,” Marcus contends, and this act of rewriting sometimes “changes old maudits into new heroes” (21). Whether or not Bara qualifies as a “maudit,” the processes theorized by Marcus, Fiske, and Lipsitz aptly describe remembrance of Bara through repurposing, as well as the circumstances that make her available and attractive to the goth sensibility.

As Lipsitz indicates, the changes observable in different manifestations of the Bara and/or vamp image are crucial points of analysis. Bara’s star image was one in a long chain of embodiments of a figure iconic to goth—the evil woman whose danger lies in her seductiveness (Figure 3.2). This recurrent archetype links Bara to the past, but also positions her as a precursor and model for later adaptations of the image. The variations and changes to the image of the dangerous woman across multiple historical and cultural contexts demonstrate the adaptability of

the myth. Its recurrence also indicates the apparent desire amongst diverse groups to hold onto this image and adapt it for specific cultural concerns relating to the fascination, admiration, or fear of women's bodies and sexuality.

Not entirely convinced that Lipsitz's dictum holds in all cases, however, I contend that with Bara and goth, the *continuities* that re-manifest in different contexts are perhaps even more significant cultural indicators than the changes. The crucial point of analysis



Figure 3.2

here is how recurring aspects are interpreted differently: new readings of old texts may be for some purposes more informative of socio-historical developments than changes over time. In the words of Barbie Zelizer, “at the same time as the use of the old secures and solidifies the new, the new helps assign and reassign meaning to the old” (222).

Just as Bara's image reiterated countless previous incarnations of (male) fear of witches, *belles dames sans merci*, and other threateningly powerful unruly women, recurring visual tropes such as long black hair, heavily made-up eyes, body-revealing clothing, and the cold, contemptuous glare continue to circulate, metamorphose, and invite new interpretations through a bevy of cinematic femmes fatales, seductresses, and innumerable vampires. This mode of appropriation is culturally evident enough for Jonathan Rigby to point out in his history of





**Figure 3.3:** Nita Naldi in the 1920s

American horror films that Bara and fellow vamps Naldi, Valeska Suratt, and Louise Glaum “predated the ‘Goth’ style by some seven decades” (27) (Figure 3.3). This retroactive discovery or attribution of goth traits to stars of the past, leading them to be reimagined and embellished with new meanings, reveals much about the concerns and desires of individuals within the subculture.

More significantly, fans themselves recognize both continuance and change in their exploration of the past and its wealth of “alternative,” non-mainstream popular culture options. Some sense of this is evident in a brief article, “Forever Theda,” in the spring 2008 issue of the goth style magazine *Gothic Beauty*, that presents her as a stylistic foremother. The article

includes examples of the extravagant 1910s publicity stories, anecdotes about Helena Rubinstein developing a special run-proof eye makeup for Bara,<sup>7</sup> and the comment, “Considering Theda’s outré public image, it’s no wonder that she has re-emerged as an icon of the darkly feminist femme fatale” (19). Charmaine Ortega Getz, a freelance journalist from Colorado and author of the article, describes herself as “a friendly observer” rather than a “participant in the various subcultures,” and said that she believes goth is attractive to some individuals “because it presents a persona far more powerful and interesting than the one they think an oppressive society wants them to have.” Elaborating on this assertion, Getz commented, “Presenting a powerful and

interesting persona takes a powerful and interesting look,” one that draws upon distinctive clothing, make-up, and hairstyles (e-mail interview).

More significant than the look of goth, Getz maintains, is the “attitude that says, ‘I am more powerful and interesting than you,’” without which all of the outward trappings of goth fail to convince: Bara, Getz said, could project this sort of attitude “in spades.” Despite the changes in beauty standards and acting styles that make Bara look “hammy” to current viewers, Getz said that she “still manages to project the impression that she is the most attractive, powerful and interesting person in the show,” adding, “That’s catnip for Goths in general.”

The process by which goths shape their tastes, interests, and aesthetic, as Getz described it, is a form of *bricolage*. Janet Staiger describes bricolage as a practice in which individuals assert agency “through ad hoc combinations of signs” to “express ideas” in a more complex, personal way (*Reception* 65). Bricolage may also be a way in which goths seek out unusual or obscure materials to enhance their sense of distinctiveness—Getz’s article on Bara appearing in a goth fashion magazine could be seen as evidence of goths’ desire to explore the unusual and the obscure. Many goths, she said, “read a lot of history...the kind of quirky stuff that never gets covered in school textbooks.” Likewise, their selection of media tends towards the specialized, arcane, and “alternative.” In addition to the music and music videos that in part define the subculture,<sup>8</sup> cinema provides “a visual handbook for many Goths on appearance and attitude,” according to Getz. She elaborated that allusions to various films, from historical costume dramas to science fiction, in goth style indicate the eclectic and erudite film knowledge and tastes among goths.<sup>9</sup> Combined with goth’s fascination with the past, this makes the subculture’s adoption and adaptation of a star from long ago like Bara all the more understandable.

## Repurposing as Identity Work

As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, one of the primary ways Bara has been remembered is through retellings of the excessive, often absurd or unbelievable, stories used in Fox's intense 1910s publicity scheme to promote her as a fabricated type. The revelation of the constructedness of identity in this aspect of Bara's image might also open the suggestion that *all* identity is a matter of discourse rather than an inherent "being." Further, it may lead individuals to approach their own identity construction and performance as an exercise in metatextuality, in which the "text" of their identity references, expands upon, critiques, or parodies selected elements chosen from the mediascape and is appropriated in an act of self-making bricolage.

Fans develop their tastes and allegiances to media texts based on feeling as if they have some personal connection, identification, or investment in that text—some aspect of the interaction with the text resonates to a degree that the one makes his or her enjoyment of that specific text part of one's identity: being a fan. It is undeniable that media have enormous impact on how we shape our sense of self, but rather than judge whether this is "bad" or "good," what interests me more is the ever-changing cultural and social discourse resulting from the dynamic of audience interaction with the media. Media likes and dislikes have been credited with making an array of options for identity work available to individuals. David Gauntlett summarizes a prevalent idea in media studies with the proposition that the media offer up "a range of stars, icons and characters from whom we can acceptably borrow bits and pieces of their public persona for use in our own" (255-6). These "bits and pieces" may become resources for helping individuals to "think through their sense of self and modes of expression," and in so doing aid in the formulation of a coherent self-narrative as part of a healthy identity (256).

Media theory concerning the potential benefit to the individual through interaction with selected media texts has elements that mesh well with queer theory. Queer theory scholars have

argued for identity to be seen not only as a construction, but also as an ongoing process, a negotiation of multiple and contingent *selves* that is about performance rather than any (imagined) intrinsic qualities. Awareness of this means that the subject can also be aware of intervening in the performance of self by exerting choice in selecting, emulating, adapting, and incorporating the “building blocks” of identity based on what one encounters in day to day life. Along these lines, Gauntlett contends that because “nothing about identity is clear-cut,” popular culture’s indistinct and contradictory messages as to what constitutes “the 'ideal' model for the self” are actually “a good thing,” prompting a greater degree of input from the individual in how he or she reformulates the identity-building resources extracted from the media (255-6).

For most of its participants, “going goth” is about the reinvention and repurposing of the self, in which cultivation, intensification, and expression of certain tastes, attitudes, and affiliations are integral to developing or refining a distinctive sense of self and one’s relation to the world. Stars can contribute to this process, Richard Dyer indicates, in that they embody “the social categories in which people are placed” (*Heavenly* 17-18). While individuals may be “placed” in social categories, they can also read stars as either demonstrative of more successful ways of being within that category, or indicative of the broader field of identity options which one may explore. Terry Beers contends that individuals’ readings of a text are shaped by the “orientation” in which one finds oneself, and the specific goals one develops within this orientation; “idiosyncratic” or “oppositional” readings, then, derive from goals different than those associated with dominant readings (Staiger, *Interpreting* 154). “Aberrant decodings,” according to Umberto Eco, are in fact “the norm for mass media messages” (qtd Fiske, “Television” 405), while Richard Rorty argues that the defining quality of a “good”

interpretation “should simply be one which makes a difference to the reader concerned” (Hills, *Fan* 14).

Not finding satisfaction in the identity “resources” most readily available in mainstream, populist media, goths are typically drawn elsewhere for more options. Seeking out that which is *not* readily available leads one to the margins of culture, in which the cutting-edge, the anti-commercial, and the oppositional coexist with the obscure, the forgotten, and relics of the past. Conditioned as we are as consumers of the media, it is not surprising that one of the most visible ways individuals search for a “useable past” is looking to the popular culture of previous decades or generations. Spooner emphasizes that what she refers to as “contemporary Gothic” is “profoundly concerned with the past” and its “incursions” into the present (12), and that new forms of the Gothic are “always a revival of something else.” Precisely because of this, the Gothic is also “dependent on traces of other stories, familiar images and narrative structures, intertextual allusions” for its very existence (10). Assessing what this means in terms of cultural ramifications, Spooner writes, “The notion of revival can be seen to imply a reappropriation and reinvention of previous forms rather than a straightforward repletion.” Images, forms, and types from the past are recontextualized in such a way that they are “reanimated with a new identity” (11-12).

Engaging with the past in this way, I contend, is less likely to result in nostalgia than in a repurposing of the past that revitalizes old images and expands horizons of expectations. A “modern” identity, according to Carolyn Steedman, is constructed through identification with “the desired object, group, or person (perhaps a historical identity, located in the historical past).” Although this is in some ways “a claim for absolute sameness,” she says it is also a “process of individuation, the modern making of an individuality and a unique personality.” On looking to

the past as part of this process, Steedman writes, “the past is searched for something...that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self, confirms them as they want to be, and feel in some measure that they already are” (77). Aside from simply shoring up a sense of identity, I see purposeful engagement with old media artifacts to be a means of expanding horizons of expectations of the *self*.

Although the lack of accessible referents and attachments, such as films, results in fans having more input into what Bara’s image means, being a Bara fan also requires more effort than is normally demanded by popular culture. The research, reading, and investigation needed to find out more about her and fill in the many lacunae prompt engagement with the vast intertextual web surrounding Bara’s stardom. The cross-media exploration spurred by curiosity about her—an exploration spoken of by all the Bara fans I interviewed—leads one to books, magazines, newspapers, feature films, documentaries, Internet searches, participation in web-based forums, and other resources. Each component provides a richer depiction of the cultural, historical, and political import of popular culture, while also expanding conceptions of how a text can be adapted and used.

This is not only a case of a subject looking outwards from a specific text for the new, but can also redirect the subject back into the same text in a different way, revealing previously unrealized means by which that text might be useful, workable, and more adaptable to individual needs and desires. Although there may be external influences, including the desire to “fit in” with a particular group, on which resources are tapped and how they are interpreted, this nonetheless represents a process of developing a personalized pastiche of interests.

This practice is a less visible but far more widespread form of fan “production” than the creation of fan fiction, zines, artwork, or other tangible artifacts, or even participation in

imagined communities of fandom, as described most famously by Henry Jenkins. As Fiske maintains, making the distinction between popular culture's users and consumers lies in the former reworking a text into a "resource to be used" rather than passively accepting it as is (*Understanding* 15). Reading into and extracting meaning from media of the past in a way that shapes them to "fit" current and idiosyncratic concerns represents an active use of the media, tied to acts of performative consumption.

### **Bara and the Subcultural Capital of Cultivated Taste**

Uncountable factors, each contingent upon uncountable influences, impact how an individual repurposes a media text as self-making act. While I limit my analysis to certain aspects of taste, affect, and revisionist memory as they shape identity, it should be understood that these and myriad other concerns are so interwoven that their interrelation can never be untangled. Pierre Bourdieu's work on how "distinctive" tastes reinforce class dividers has prompted much follow up analysis of how cultural capital, which Mike Budd defines as "an institutionalized discourse that confers social prestige on those who command it, separating them from those who do not" (91), influences identity politics beyond class alone. In this section, I look at how cultivating and expressing a taste for archaic popular culture, specifically Theda Bara, might bestow distinction upon goths in the form of *subcultural* capital. Adapting Bourdieu's terminology, Sarah Thornton devised the concept of subcultural capital to describe the discourse particular to specific "underground" groups that confers the distinction of being "in the know." Subcultural capital can take both objectified forms, determined by the possessions that demonstrate knowingness, and embodied form, determined by the individual's social performance of knowingness (Thornton 11-12). Performing fandom of something out of the ordinary as a component of a distinctive identity entails both forms of subcultural capital.

As any American teenager could tell you, one's tastes in popular culture come with a host of associations attached, giving rise to preconceptions and evaluations amongst one's peers and regulating social categorization. And, as some become painfully aware, tastes that fall outside a narrow range of options—options that are often complementary to consumerism, commodity fetishism, and perpetuation of hegemony—mark one as “different.” Some media scholars theorize “difference” and the choices one makes in the performance of oneself as a kind of strategy. Thornton, for instance, writes of the efforts made by young people to “seek out and accumulate cultural goods and experiences for strategic use within their own social worlds” (8).

Personal tastes, and the making of those tastes a matter of public recognition, therefore, are integral to the performance of self, for as Bourdieu writes, tastes (or, as he calls them, “manifested preferences”) are “the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (56). With goths, the performative consumption of certain cultural products and not others is meant as an indicator of opposition, a rejection of certain elements of mainstream popular culture (and by extension, elements of the broader social surround), while at the same time embracing other elements as an act of self-determination. Whether a subject's capacity to select or reject options from the mediascape is an actual or illusory exertion of agency, it seems probable nevertheless in our current historical and social situation that the acquisition and cultivation of tastes that fall outside the mainstream can provide at least some affective or psychological benefit in terms of acquiring *a sense of* agency and distinction.

Maintaining that “Taste is what brings together things and people that go together” (241), Bourdieu stresses the symbiotic relationship between economic and social systems that engenders taste with the power to maintain rigid class boundaries. As noted, goth is a distinctly bourgeois identity, but as a subculture it corresponds with what Bourdieu described as the



*dominated* bourgeoisie, for whom the accrual of cultural capital is a kind of compensation for lack of the high economic capital enjoyed by the *dominating* bourgeois. One could reasonably extend the division between dominating and dominated to include other markers of identity besides economic capital. As Thornton contends, “Subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality, and race are all employed to keep the determinations of class, income, and occupation at bay” (105).

Summarizing Bourdieu’s discussion of the dominated class, Hills writes that the dominated seek to “maximize a return” on their tastes and cultural capital by “making ‘risky’ investments in new forms of cultural distinction and hence in new fields of cultural value” (*Fan* 59). This can take the form of “liking the same things (as the dominating bourgeoisie) differently” or “liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration” (*Fan* 48). Bourdieu determines that this kind of “risky investment” results in the highest accrual of cultural capital (*Fan* 59).

Bourdieu’s analysis of the “pay off” from risky investments aptly describes taste formation within the goth subculture, where expressing interest in “the romance of old things” (Reynolds 353) may be a way of demonstrating the kind of rarified taste that solidifies one’s individual and social identity as a goth. Atypical of youth-oriented subcultures, goth’s investment in “old things” appears to contradict Thornton’s equation of subcultural capital with “hipness,” and the premium placed by youth cultures on seeking out the new as a way to delay the social fixity that comes with adulthood (102). Subcultural capital can take many forms, however, as determined by factors internal to the individual subculture.

Goth tends to place a high degree of subcultural capital not just on knowledge about and appreciation of things from another time, but also on the sophistication, intrepidity, and media

savvy implied by cultivating a “knowingness” through a taste for the archaic. Looking to the past for “new” objects of interest means that goths are more likely to seek out or stumble upon silent films, which often contain spectacular imagery that resonates with goth taste and aesthetics: costumes, make-up, sets, gestures, and lighting that accentuate glamour and artifice, as well as the overall intrigue of “past-ness.” The subcultural value placed on exploration of the past is perhaps even greater in steampunk, a movement with many overlaps and crossovers to goth. Steampunk emerges from a “speculative” science fiction genre in which the past is reimagined as teeming with fantastic anachronisms and “low-tech” manifestations of futuristic technologies (telecommunication devices, scientific equipment, and weaponry handmade of wood, brass, and clockwork gears; steam-powered robots; travel by Zeppelin, etc.). As an exercise in creative alternate history, steampunk exemplifies how repurposing the past and performing an identity that valorizes the reinvented past serve as ways of thinking about and critiquing one’s own temporal and cultural place.

As such, knowing about and liking a semi-obscure figure such as Bara may hold subcultural capital for both goth and steampunk. Precisely because Bara *is* widely forgotten, and because Bara fandom requires a certain level of commitment, a taste for her image is a *cultivated* taste, and one that conveys an impression of holding specialized, arcane knowledge. Although he cautions against “overestimation of individuality” in the goth subculture, Paul Hodkinson nonetheless observes that goths desiring increased subcultural clout “usually sought to select their own individual concoction from the range of acceptable artefacts and themes” (40). As this indicates, the group identity and social signification of goth relies on the performance of a “specific range of tastes and norms” that make the subculture distinctive (80). While this also indicates that tastes amongst subcultural participants are delimited by a set of pre-approved

options, Hodkinson also claims that increased subcultural capital can be gained by selecting “subtle additions and adaptations from beyond the established stylistic boundaries” (40). Bara, a figure probably initially outside the canon of goth tastes, may be an example of this “addition and adaptation,” to be incorporated eventually into a subculturally-approved menu of appropriately gothic selections.

Because appreciation of media texts popular decades before one’s birth tends to be a niche interest, there is likely also crossover between subcultural capital and the distinctive, sometimes exclusionary, tastes of cult fandom. Passage of time, it appears, can imbue some stars of the past with the subcultural cachet necessary to be regarded as cult icons. Indeed, Hills states that cult icons are distinctive because they traverse “continuously across social-historical frames, being re-mapped and reworked in this process” rather than remaining bound to “a given set of social and cultural co-ordinates.” It is this “temporal persistence,” Hills argues, that “produces the moment of cult formation” (*Fan* 140). Part of a text’s ascendance to cult status, according to Hills, corresponds with my argument that the remembrance and use-value of Bara may actually have benefited from the unavailability of her films, since still photos of and stories about her have made her image more open to individuated readings and thus repurposings. Hills identifies factors such as “a certain ‘undecidability’, a space for interpretation, speculation and fan affect which cannot be closed down by final ‘proof’ or ‘fact’” as prime determinants of cult status, as they provide fans with an “endlessly deferred narrative” that they may read into (*Fan* 143).

Cult icons, Hills contends, resist closure or even a fixed point of identity, meaning that they can become fonts of “endless interpretation and speculation” (*Fan* 142). The loss of most of Bara’s motion picture record can be regarded as a literal “endlessly deferred narrative,” but also significant is the recognition of Bara as a recurring type that lends itself particularly well to

cross-temporal, cross-cultural adaptations. As a curiosity of the past, augmented by excess, bizarreness, and inscrutability, Bara resonates across changes of time and place through avenues of irony, parody, idiosyncratic interpretations, and reuses. Not only was Bara featured in an article in *Cult Movies* magazine, for instance, but the author also combines a tongue-in-cheek approach with an almost wistful appreciation of what Bara's image might communicate. Touting her as the screen's first sex symbol, and speculating that she was the first woman onscreen not only to have but to "enjoy to its fullest" an active sex life without a moralizing narrative punishment attached, Rudy Minger writes, "In some ways those old silents are still ahead of us" (26).<sup>10</sup> As will be examined later in this chapter, the interpretation of Bara's vamp as a symbol of sexual freedom in an era of sexual repression has been one of the attributes that has perpetuated interest in her amongst both feminists and goths—two groups with considerable connections but also many contentions.

Those who acquire subcultural or cult tastes, and view them as counter or resistant to mainstream tastes, may regard their object choice as a political statement. It is, however, according to Fiske, the way of using popular culture rather than the particular text being used that is of significance (*Understanding* 15). Mark Jancovich argues that cult tastes often *reinforce* rather than subvert elitist class divisions and the economic interests of the film industry:

[C]ult movie audiences are less an internally coherent "taste culture" than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined "normality", a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy. (315)

Recontextualizing and repurposing of older texts thus becomes a source of pleasure, distinction, identity construction, and social performance that may or may not correspond to what could theoretically be considered resistance, but are significant at both the individual and cultural level nonetheless.

Because key traits of goth—its origins in punk, the sometimes shocking physical appearance of its adherents, associations with morbidity, decadence, and the occult, and a defiance of cultural conventions that has generated considerable moral panic—have marked it as “rebellious” or “oppositional,” it would be remiss not to consider the relevance of resistance in this case. Unlike punk, which is generally considered a reaction against social conventions, goth has frequently been regarded as more about style than political convictions. Simon Reynolds, for instance, sees goth’s interest in the past as an avoidance of political realities: “Goth’s interest in the timeless could be seen as precisely that, a refusal of the timely, an apolitical flight from the urgent topical issues of the day” (354). Rather than the development of consciousness and convictions or the exertion of political will, however, my analysis of goth and Bara fandom regards resistance more as the construction of a persona and the performance of a social role. I regard resistance in this sense as a component of identity formation, in which opposition, marginality, anti-hegemonic discourse, and tactical use of the media are performed within the parameters of the subculture, and become inseparable from matters of affect, taste, consumer practices, cultural memory, use of the past, and individual psychology.

Subcultures and countercultures place a high value on participants at least appearing to be resistant, fostering a group identity and cultural position in which resistance actually becomes part of belonging rather than separation. In this sense, goth identity, subcultural capital, and counter-tastes involve the desire to be, or at least *seem*, resistant. As such, allegiance to and

social performance of a particular subcultural identity/ideology has little to do with actively working towards progressive change, but is more about obtaining a desired identity or connection to a group through display of taste; further, it is less about “overcoming” marginality than seeking out a marginal position that purportedly constitutes a rejection and defiance of the dominant culture.

While this implies that there are serious questions about the efficacy of such “resistance” in political terms, shifting focus from the (theoretical) macropolitical to the (practical) micropolitical, and from the speculated social impact of fandom to the day-to-day negotiations of self by fans, enables other concerns to take precedence. Thus, the remembrance, rearticulation, and repurposing of Bara in contributing to the formation of an individual sense of self, sense of relation to others, and group identity, further transforms the issue of resistance from a matter of politics to a matter of affect.

### **“Some Horrible Defect in Me”: Affect, Alienation, and Bara**

The fixation in academic fan studies on the politics of resistance, Hills argues, has led to “an extremely partial and limited examination of fan practices”—so much so that fan studies are “emptied” of the concerns he suggests most clearly determine fandom: “affect, attachment, and even passion” (*Fan* 65). As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green point out, a number of cultural theorists have found value in popular culture and “bottom-up participation” only as they might function in terms of “a political project of emancipation and democracy, tied to the politics of class, race, and gender” (11). Unlike earlier media scholars, such as Fiske, who relate affect, pleasure, and satisfaction to the politics of reading strategies,<sup>11</sup> more recent scholarship looks at the value of affect for its own sake, at the individual level and distinct from matters of political consequence.

Critical of earlier studies' reductive handling of fan affect, Hills suggests that fans "create the conventions that they attend (to), through subjective and affective play." This form of play has the capacity to "imaginatively create its own set of boundaries" (*Fan* 112). As a result of this affective play, Hills argues, popular culture texts can be "used creatively by fans to manage tensions between inner and outer worlds" (106). As this indicates, focus on affect and subjectivity does not necessarily preclude concern for what fandom may mean in terms of the fan's relation to the larger world. Sue Campbell writes of the need for theories of fandom "that allow for the creation of affective meanings that are new and potentially liberatory," but questions whether "oppositional subcultures" are capable of providing liberatory meaning: "[T]hat I must belong to and reflect the values of an oppositional subcultures to express outlaw emotions potentially *restricts possibilities for expressing personal significance as it is reflective of the patterns I make of my life and experiences*" (qtd Hills, *Fans* 93, Campbell's emphasis).

Along with style and outward display of taste, both emotion (a response resulting from a specific event or encounter) and affect (a more generalized "feeling" without a specifically identifiable source) are among the primary—or at least most stereotyped—ways "gothness" is enacted (Wilkins 52). Thus, the display of a "dark" affect serves to mark goth as a social and individual identity, even if one's identification with "darkness" takes the form of an ironic, self-reflexive awareness of the goth stereotype rather than one's actual affective state. The feelings an individual has about her or his social and cultural surround have tremendous impact on what one chooses to incorporate into a sense of self. My concern is primarily how feeling, as well as performing and/or exaggerating, affective states such as cynicism, defiance, ennui, or melancholy, influence those choices, and thus the use of popular culture.

In her ethnographic study of goth in the U.S., Amy C. Wilkins makes the case that both the individual and group identities subcultures grant their participants can be used “to solve problems” encountered in everyday life (3), including feelings of isolation, loneliness, and ostracization. As a platform for reinventing the self, goth enables an identity that makes participants’ “white middle-class lives more tolerable, more fun, more interesting, more *real*, but nonetheless still white and middle class” (51). Wilkins’s discussion of goth as a strategy focuses particularly on her contention that most goths have reinvented themselves from stigmatization as “geeks,” and that their reformulated identity as “freaks” repositions them in their social strata. Wilkins argues that freakiness is a strategy by which erstwhile geeks “renounce humiliation, invisibility, and boredom, while resolving some of the contradictions of white, middle-class expectations,” such as restraint and repression of emotion, sexuality, and self-presentation (52).

Wilkins also emphasizes the strategy of “self-marginalization” that enables goths to make a show of contesting and rejecting the status quo by “reclaiming” marginality as the desired position they themselves choose (53). Attendant with this self-marginalization, Wilkins argues, is the performance of a certain affective state, in which “claiming to be sad or even psychiatrically disordered” is a way of expressing disenchantment with “mainstream expectations of ‘normal’ psychological adjustment” (5). Similar to Campbell’s expression of doubt about the efficacy of subculture, Wilkins surmises that while “projects” like goth provide numerous ways for participants to make life “more tolerable or more exciting,” the requirements of the social performance of goth also constrain those participants (4).

In direct contrast to a number of Wilkins’s conclusions, however, Hodkinson rejects the conception of goth as a “strategy,” saying, “participation in the goth scene did not appear to entail the same ‘problem-solving’ function for all members” (29). Drawing his insights from a



U.K.-based ethnographic study of the subculture, Hodkinson maintains that goth should not be regarded as “symbolic of any particular structural, psychological or political circumstances or goals” (61). While Wilkins emphasizes what she sees as the impermanence of goth identity, Hodkinson finds that goth entails more commitment and consequently is of greater “cultural substance” (24), which includes a consistent sense of distinctive identity and a relatively high level of autonomy from the dominant discourse. This becomes significant in light of his gloss on Dick Hebdige’s contention that the consumption of subculture participants, in contrast to those outside the subculture, “was deemed to be characterized by active selection and appropriation—assigning to everyday objects new subversive meanings in their subcultural context” (10). Fiske also regards “self-display” as a way of exerting agency in making meaning out of “the resources of the system,” but goes a step further in tying this act of identity construction to affect: “It has within it elements of defiance and of pride in self- and subcultural identities, and it is pleasurable insofar as it is a means of controlling social relations and one’s cultural environment” (*Reading* 29).

Negative affect, often tied to a sense of difference, alienation, and loneliness, appears to attract many young people to goth—not necessarily because of the subculture’s reputation for gloominess, but rather in search of connectedness and a feeling of being understood. A number of Hodkinson’s informants strongly rejected the gloomy goth stereotype, pointing out that they were far happier to have found friends and community in the subculture than they had been before (62). Similarly, a website promoting an e-book described as the “ultimate guide” to the goth lifestyle and written by “a genuine Goth” uses the presumed commonality of affect as a selling point, asking the site visitor, “Have you ever felt like you didn’t belong?”. The unnamed author describes how goth changed her life for the better by alleviating her sense of isolation and

providing her with a community: “Always feeling alone and misunderstood, the teen... experienced an epiphany when she discovered the Goth culture. She found friends, people with mutual interests and a sense of belonging. Her days of feeling lonely and being an outcast ended” (“Goth”).

Paraphrasing Chad Dell’s argument that fan movements are “often a proactive response to changing social and economic environments over which people have little control,” Karen Ross and Virginia Nightingale contend that taste for a certain object of fandom may be merely consequential to the pleasures and satisfactions one finds in the social aspects of group membership (126). Further, both social and intertextual networks, Hills argues, can make the “attachments and affects” of fandom “contagious,” close associations with others in a group causing a particular fandom to spread (*Fan* 88). Nonetheless, he finds that “oppositional subcultures” must “precede and culturally support fan interpretation and affect,” a view that regards affect “as capable of ‘creating culture’ as well as being caught up in it” (*Fan* 93). “As with other successful subcultures,” Reynolds writes, goth has “created plenty of scope for individual expression while simultaneously marshaling a potent tribal identity” (353). Therefore, while individuals may “contract” an interest in Bara through exposure to the tastes of other goths, the individual use can never be entirely dictated by subcultural concerns.

Affect is also central to the *recollection* of cultural artifacts of the past, the process of cathexis (investing those artifacts with emotional significance), and the use value that individuals may extract from them. Goth’s fascination with “darkness,” in connection with the affective predilection that draws one to the margins of culture, I contend, factor into individuals having or acquiring a taste for an image like Bara’s, and extracting personal use from that image. Bara’s own status as a misfit, as someone “out of step” with her time period or beyond the pale, and as

someone who seemingly flourished in spite of all this, may be a component of Bara's appeal to goth. One little examined aspect of Bara's early publicity is its depiction of her childhood alienation from "normal" children. While this facet of her publicity may not be recalled explicitly, her freakiness and Other-ness are nonetheless "sticky" enough associations that they have shaped remembrance of her, and influenced some of the ways her image has been repurposed. Goths and other fans are rediscovering layers of the palimpsest that were inscribed at the beginning, faded over time, but were always readable for those inclined to look.

As previously discussed, one publicity tactic used to alleviate trepidation about the immorality of Bara's image, as well as tip off moviegoers that the whole image was a put-on, involved depicting her as a victimized "misunderstood good woman" who did not deserve the scorn and hate gullible audiences purportedly felt towards her. Part of this campaign was to evoke further sympathy for Bara by showing that she had suffered from such unjust treatment since childhood. Because of her looks and the "strange, sometimes weird fancies that possessed her," publicity reports read, "her schoolgirl companions were afraid of her" (Courtlandt, "Theda") and even thought she was a witch (Bara, "Whispers"). One such account reads as if it could have been written by a current day ostracized adolescent:

My school life was unhappy—very. I was not popular with the girls. They said they were afraid of me because my eyes were so big and black and strange-looking. There is no greater tragedy in life than that of a child who is not popular with her playmates. Night after night I'd wear myself out sobbing over it. But I never confided the misery of it, even to my mother, because I was ashamed. I felt there must be some horrible defect in me—the only girl in school who was treated courteously but shunned—through fear. (Bara, "Whispers")

Similar press stories emphasized both her estrangement from humanity and the sadness she felt because of it. One of the publicity tales most “encrusted” to the Bara image, and retold in *A Vamp Supreme* (Chapter Two), is that of her frightening a bedraggled little waif to whom she tried to give food. Other press pieces reported that she was sometimes followed by crowds of children “who pick me to pieces, audibly, and compare my screen-self and my real-self with alarming frankness.” The only difference with adults, she said, was that they were more careful to insult her when she couldn’t hear them (“Distressed”).

### **“A Female Dracula”: Bara and Horror**

The sense of “outsiderness” felt by some goth-inclined youth can also generate or intensify interest in the horror genre. James Hannaham describes goth as “a scene whose fashion and contrary stance idealized old horror films” because participants in the subculture have “dealt with their feelings of alienation from society by reinventing themselves as ‘monsters’” (96). Likewise, Spooner sees empathy for monsters as a defining feature of goth, with the monstrous Other becoming a “point of identification” (103). Hodkinson, on the other hand, found that many goths disdain “overdoing” the horror associations as a “crude confirmation of popular stereotypes” (46). While claims that goths “reinvent” themselves as monsters might be excessive, attraction to the horrific in literature, film, or art is inarguably a component of the goth subculture.

The associations that link Bara to horror and the supernatural have been an integral and evidently effective part of her image and publicity from the beginning; horror allusions were, in fact, built into her star-making role in *A Fool There Was* (Powell, 1915). The film version of *A Fool There Was* is an early example of a text migrating across several media platforms, originating in 1897 as a lurid painting by Philip Burne-Jones titled *The Vampire* (Figure 3.4).

*The Vampire* raised scandal at the time for its intimations of rapacious, overpowering female sexuality, depicting a gloating woman with long dark hair clad in a sleeveless white chemise (replicated in Bara's costuming for the film) (Figure 3.5) crouching over a man lying unconscious, perhaps dead, on a bed.<sup>12</sup> The painting inspired a floridly misogynistic poem by Burne-Jones's cousin, Rudyard Kipling. The poem "The Vampire," which famously begins with the line "A fool there was" and perplexingly



**Figure 3.4**



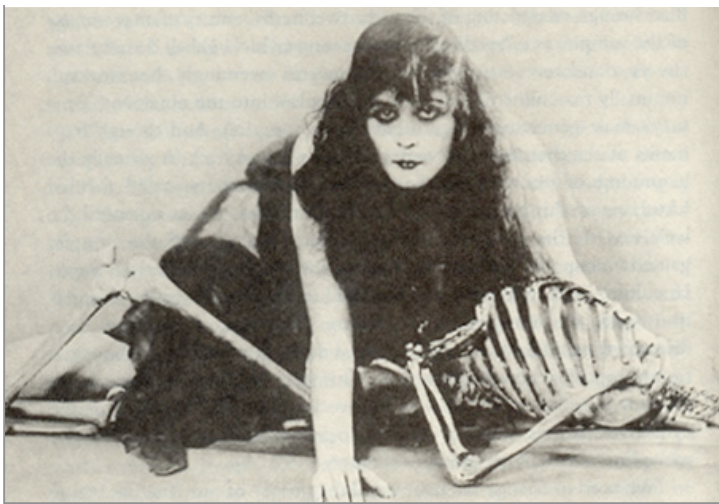
**Figure 3.5**

describes the titular wicked woman as "a rag and a bone and a hank of hair," accompanied the painting in the exhibition catalogue at its London showing. The Kipling poem in turn served as source material for a long-running theatrical melodrama, *A Fool There Was*, by Porter Emerson Browne, which premiered in 1909. An unsuccessful novelization followed, but the play's sustained popularity prompted William Fox to purchase the film rights.

A stereotypical characteristic of goth is its eroticization of vampires, and the most obvious connection between Bara and horror is the double meaning of the word "vampire." Bara's character in *A Fool There Was* is only identified as "The Vampire," compounding her



**Figure 3.6**



**Figure 3.7**

allure of mystery and the inhuman cold-bloodedness of her seduction schemes. Use of the word “vampire” to signify a predatory woman did not originate with *A Fool There Was*, and at the time of the film’s release the word typically was *not* taken to signify the bloodsucking supernatural entity. Hard as it is to conceive with their current media omnipresence, supernatural vampires were rare in American popular culture of the early twentieth century (virtually nonexistent in cinema), but this meaning of the word was hardly

unknown.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Bara’s film career was historically situated between two of the supernatural vampire’s most important cultural moments: the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1897, and a stage adaptation that was a huge hit both in its initial 1924 London production and 1927 Broadway revision.

The confusion between the two meanings of the word “vampire” may have been invoked deliberately as a component in Bara’s publicity. Promotional images used to build interest in the mystery woman frequently posed Bara in ways that evoked the folkloric vampire or other demonic entities. In addition to images of her crouching behind human skeletons like a sated



predator (Figure 3.6; Figure 3.7), one of the most frequently reproduced photos of Bara shows her with her body tightly wrapped in black fabric like a winding sheet, pulling her hair at arms' length above her head to resemble bat wings or devil horns as she glowers into the lens (Figure 1.6).

Likewise, an article from the November 1915 issue of *The Theatre* magazine featuring a photo of Bara from the same shoot in the same pose includes a graphic of a bat (Figure 3.8).

The contained threat of Bara's foreignness was exploited as a form of titillation for audiences terrified of miscegenation and anxious over the increasingly indistinct borders between white and non-white, blurred by non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. In the stridently nativist 1910s and 20s, the word "vampire" in both its meanings would have carried associations with ethnic "outsiders"—central, eastern, and southern Europeans from whose folklore the vampire invaded Western consciousness, and who as immigrants were regarded as bloodsucking parasites and agents of infection of the American workforce and the "white" bloodline. Bara, as a patently fake ethnic, gave audiences (depending on their level of acceptance of Fox's publicity) a safely pleasurable



Figure 3.8: *The Theatre*, November 1915, page 246

thrill of transgression without really threatening their sense of propriety. Importantly, too, Bara appears to have served a counter-purpose by acting out the disruption of rigid American propriety, appealing to some immigrant audiences (discussed in Chapter One), and later goth sensibilities.

The alien aspects of Bara's allure were reinforced rhetorically through a barrage of appellations in publicity and advertising that emphasized her unwholesome allure by invoking the demonic. One fan magazine article refers to Bara as "a witch symbol to scare children," and concludes by voicing its "appreciation of a woman who has tried to make good as a vampire, a werewolf, a she-devil, who feasts on the souls of men" (Courtlandt "Theda"). Styling Bara as "The Vampire Woman," "The Bat Woman," "The Most Mysterious Woman Living," "The Devil's Daughter," "Hell's Handmaiden," "Destiny's Dark Angel," "Purgatory's Ivory Angel," "The Priestess of Sin," "The Witch of the Silver Sheet," "The Satanic Sorceress of the Shadow Stage," or other flamboyant honorifics evocative of the supernatural, press reports endeavored, sometimes awkwardly, to strike a public-pleasing balance between Bara the vampire-witch associated with the occult, ancient mysteries, and sin, and Bara the pitiable, misunderstood good girl.<sup>14</sup> Louella Parsons, for example, proclaimed Bara "a brilliant woman," with "one of the most marvelous minds of any woman I know," but averred that "she is superstitious and she does believe in spirits" ("Seen" [A]). Readers were told, "La Bara is a student of the occult; she reads the heavens" (Franklin 72), and that to her "weird mind the occult sciences and the philosophy taught by the Hindu were more interesting than all the pleasure found roaming about Broadway" (Parsons, "Seen" [B]), implying that Bara's occultism was linked to "exotic" ethnicities (Figure 3.9).



While the mystical component of Bara's image was generally just one more layer to the overall palimpsest of intrigue, Bara's promotion as the reincarnation of various historical figures was a recurring marketing scheme, sometimes with direct connections to Fox's product, sometimes as general color.<sup>15</sup> One publicity piece, which appeared in modified form in a number of sources,<sup>16</sup> pondered whether Bara's physical appearance indicated that some of history's most infamous villainesses had "fatefully found reincarnation" in her. Indulging in some of the most sensationalistic of all descriptions of the star, the article informed the reader

Her hair is like the serpent locks of Medusa, her eyes have the cruel cunning of Lucrezia Borgia, till now held up as the wickedest woman in the world; her mouth is the mouth of the sinister, scheming Delilah, and her hands are those of the blood-bathing Elizabeth Bathory, who slaughtered young girls that she might bathe in their warm life blood and so retain her beauty. Can it be that Fate has reincarnated in Theda Bara the souls of these monsters of medieval times? (Bara, "Why")

Readers were assured, however, that Bara was not *really* monstrous, and was in fact fulfilling a higher purpose as an exemplary avatar, so that "the women of this age may see face to face the loathsome depths to which the worst of their sex have descended" ("Is This"). The article also reported that "Mlle. Bara may yet be asked to play the part" of Erzsébet Báthory, the sixteenth-century Hungarian noblewoman who purportedly had over 600 young women tortured to death in order to bathe in their blood—a speculation that reinforced the connection between Bara and vampires, and links Bara to one of goth's most iconic figures.<sup>17</sup>

Linda Williams has argued that in horror films both women and monsters are visualized in an objectified, fetishized manner, but that such depictions also position both as threats to the

“normality” of male domination. Likewise, what might be regarded as transgressive in Bara’s image as a vicious siren whose sexual allure disrupts social norms may also contribute to the ongoing connection between the vamp and the monstrous. This may explain the ongoing tendency for Bara to crop up in books and magazines about the horror genre (which is, in fact, the way I discovered Bara, perusing a book on horror films at the Carnegie Library in Seward, Nebraska when I was a child). Typically, discussion of Bara is in passing and used to explain the distinction between the two meanings of the word vampire, as in Carlos Clarens’s venerable *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film* (61) and David J. Skal’s *The Monster Show* (89). Both works contrast Bara’s mere vamp with Bela Lugosi’s full-blown vampire in *Dracula* (Browning, 1931). Rigby also compares Bara and Lugosi, but in a more compelling way, arguing that Bara’s exotic vamp image was “transposed” onto “Latin lover” actors like Rudolph Valentino before “mutating, with a pleasing circularity, into the slickly venomous form” of Lugosi’s *Dracula* (27-8). A 2001 *Filmfax* article made such connections between the look and attitude of Bara’s persona and horror explicit by pronouncing Bara “a female *Dracula*” (Kugel 78).



**Figure 3.9:** Drawing accompanying Louella Parson’s column of June 24, 1917. Title illegible, *Chicago Herald*, no page number. Theda Bara scrapbook, vol. 1. Robinson Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

In spite of the tenuous connection between Bara and horror, she nonetheless has aroused genre fans' curiosity for generations. In the April 1961 issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, a horror and science fiction fan magazine aimed at a youth market, a reader requests an article on Bara's life story, prompting the editor to rather dismissively quip "She was a vamp, Bob, not a vampire" (Feinstein). More recently, a website dedicated to horror films and "macabre culture" featured a lengthy posting on Bara. The site includes her as part of a "Women in Horror" series and presents Bara as a forerunner to later horrific female characters, commenting, "anxiety about the potential destructive power of female lust and ambition has stayed with us, and the threatening women which embody it have formed an important part of the modern horror genre" ("Women in Horror"). Interpreted this way, Bara's memorability is heightened by deeming her one of the very few actresses, along with Elsa Lanchester, Barbara Steele, and Ingrid Pitt, to achieve iconic status in the horror genre as a "monster" rather than victim. Additionally, a rather mysterious clip on YouTube, possibly connected with MTV's horror-mockumentary series *Death Valley*, features a vampire prostitute, complete with kinky patent leather boots, hot pants, and a Slavic accent, named Theda Bara ("Death Valley").<sup>18</sup>

One of the most significant textual throughways that has connected goths to Bara, however, and cemented the association of vamps with vampires, are the on-air personalities who hosted "creature feature" broadcasts of old horror films for regional television markets beginning in the 1950s. Local affiliates, needing to fill non-primetime programming hours, began broadcasting horror and science fiction films in the early 1950s. Until Screen Gems made the canonical Universal horror films of the 1930s and 40s available for television broadcast in 1957 under the title *Shock Theater*, however, most stations had to make do with decidedly lesser titles produced by Poverty Row studios like Monogram and PRC. Anticipating audiences' disdain for

such bottom rung fare, many regional productions managed to attract viewers by not just admitting but emphasizing the enjoyable badness of the old movies, beating viewers to the punch by making fun of the movies themselves.

The key to the formula was a charismatic on-air personality, the so-called “monsters of ceremonies,” played by local actors or broadcasters in various regional affiliates, who “often became greater attractions than the films themselves” (Erb 127). Typically costumed and presented as grotesque but amiable creeps and fiends, these characters provided humorous insults, puns, comic sketches, and sight gags along with the films. Vampira, often cited as the first of these local market “horror hosts,” recycled the vamp image as part of her onscreen personality.



**Figure 3.10**

Vampira was played by Finnish-born actress Maila Nurmi. Her onscreen persona combined vampish sex appeal with ghoulishness, abetted by a black wig, theatrical makeup, dagger nails, a tattered black dress with a plunging neckline, and a waist cinched so tightly it made Nurmi’s hourglass figure disturbing rather than arousing (Figure 3.10). Nurmi’s stated inspirations in creating the persona indicate that Vampira was an amalgam of popular culture referents spanning time and media, including Charles Addams’s *New Yorker* comics, the Wicked

Queen in Disney's *Snow White*, and bondage magazine models. She also cited the look of silent films stars, and declared old publicity photos of Bara "awe-inspiring" (Skal 240). Nurmi is also said to have revealed that the "Recipe For Vampira" was a combination of Bara, Tallulah Bankhead, Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich, Gloria Swanson's character Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), and the Addams character later named Morticia (Gould). Likewise, the Wikipedia entry for *The Vampira Show* reports that Nurmi's alter ego "was based on elements of several silent film actresses" including Bara and Swanson ("Vampira"). Always a problematic source when it comes to ferreting out veracity, the ubiquity of Wikipedia has forged a connection between Vampira and Bara, true or false, for potentially millions.

*The Vampira Show* premiered in April 1954, on KABC-TV in Los Angeles, to tremendous, if short-lived, popularity; the program was cancelled less than a year later. Unlike most other regional "monsters of ceremonies," however, Vampira became nationally known, covered in a feature in the June 14, 1954 issue of *Life* magazine, where she was referred to as "TV's new Theda Bara" ("June"). She also appeared in a skit on *The Red Skelton Show*, and even performed with Liberace in Las Vegas in 1956. Variations and imitations of the sexy/creepy Vampira character appeared in regional television programming across the country, including Tarantula Ghoul of KPTV in Portland, Oregon (broadcast from 1957 to 1958); Mrs. Lucifer of WBAL-TV in Baltimore (1957 to 1959); and, rather brazenly, *another* Vampira, this one on KUTV in Salt Lake City (1958 to 1959). Vampira and the other horror hostesses, influenced by the look of Bara's vamp, in turn fed back into her image, enhancing her memorability by reinforcing the connection between horror and silent film vamps, but with an ironic, parodic twist.

As with Bara and the vamp, the combination of *Eros* and *Thanatos* in these images can be interpreted as just one more embodiment of the castrating woman generated by male anxiety. These vampy TV personalities, however, are also rife with camp. While Bara herself has had a negligible relation to camp, as discussed in the previous chapter, the figure of the vamp *is* campy, and these horror hostesses burlesque the femme fatale in a way that uses humor, exaggeration, parody, and freakiness as a means of subverting objectification and expectations of gender performance. Nurmi emphasized that Vampira provided a needed alternative to the strictures of hegemony in the 1950s: “The times . . . were so conservative and so constrained.... There was so much repression, and people needed to identify with something explosive, something outlandish and truthful” (Stewart). In Nurmi’s obituary, a friend pointed out Vampira’s influence on “today’s teen ‘goth’ look” (Stewart).

The humorous aspect of the sexy/scary horror hostesses that was surely meant to dilute the threatening aspects of the image was even more apparent in two primetime sit-com vamps seen on American television from 1964 to 1966: Morticia Addams of *The Addams Family*, played by Carolyn Jones (Figure 3.11), and Lily Munster of *The Munsters*, played by Yvonne De Carlo, both actresses with established careers in mainstream Hollywood films. Even so, all of these representations carried aspects of the vamp image that couldn’t be entirely neutered, equating female freakiness with power and independence in a way that has contributed to the



**Figure 3.11:** Carolyn Jones as Morticia

vamp/vampire's use value for countercultural or oppositional subcultures. Jones's Morticia, for instance, has remained an iconic figure in popular culture at least in part because her name continues to be an insult/unintended compliment directed at goth women.

### **Rock and Roll Vampires: Bara, Counterculture, and Subculture**

A 1920 evaluation of Bara's star image concludes that in exchange for becoming a star, she "must allow herself to be exploited as the strangest sort of freak" (A. Smith, "Confessions" 58). At the time, this probably wasn't meant as a good thing, but designation as a "freak" began to take on new connotations with the 1960s countercultural movement, when it was proudly and defiantly claimed in distinguishing one's identity and views as outside the boring, oppressive "establishment." Beat and hippie "freaks," followed by other "freakish" spectacular youth subcultures like punk, goth, rave, and hip-hop, may have been scorned, denounced, or feared by the mainstream (as was Bara), but these subcultural identities were claimed and performed as ostensible acts of cultural rebellion. "Fascination with freakishness" of this stripe, according to Spooner, has to do with the performativity of identity and "remaking the self as monstrous" (29). Recalling Wilkins's previously discussed contention that goth is, in part, a social strategy through self-reinvention as a freak, Spooner likewise positions this purposeful reiteration of "the role of the outsider" as being "rewritten to appeal to an audience who buys into alienation en masse and elevates the geek to chic" (29).

This returns us to the question, however, of whether the repurposing of Bara's image holds the potential of political resonance, either at a micro or a macro level. The lengthy span (1920s to mid-1960s) in which the foremost remembrance of Bara was in the form of a joke makes all the more visible and dramatic the changes in representation, brought about by the

unprecedented cultural paradigm shifts in late 1960s America, that enabled her image, along with many other seemingly “spent” pop cultural tropes, to be reinterpreted and reused. At the same time, this indicates that these reinterpretations did not come out of the blue. Readings against the grain of Bara and other popular cultural texts *did* exist prior to the Civil Rights era, women’s liberation, and other social justice movements. Such readings, however, have largely been excluded from the mass media “time capsules” that have survived the passing of the decades, and thus also largely excluded from cultural memory. The same countercultural/subcultural ideologies and responses to the dominant culture that produced goth are presumably the same kind of impetuses behind “resistant” or idiosyncratic repurposings of popular culture.

Interest in old films and their stars became a component of the 1960s counterculture. As with the critics-turned-filmmakers associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* and French “nouvelle vague” filmmaking, some pockets of countercultural youth in the U.S. regarded reevaluation of directors and actors as an intellectual exercise and a way of discovering what could be interpreted as veiled political critique in the commercial media of the past. “Antihero” stars such as Humphrey Bogart and Marlon Brando, seen as antiauthoritarian rebels infiltrating the system, were particularly favored, but some of this association appears to have rubbed off on other stars of the past. Black-and-white posters of old movie stars became standard countercultural paraphernalia, and as Eve Golden notes, posters of Bara “have decorated the walls of a generation of college students” (*Vamp* 240).<sup>19</sup> It was Bara’s outrageous look, “the heavy makeup with white face, black-circled eyes, wild exotic costumes” that made her especially appealing to the counterculture sensibility, according to Golden. Indicating that Bara was occasionally featured even in mainstream youth culture of the era, Golden noted that her first exposure to the



star was seeing a photo of Bara as Salome in her sister's *Teen* magazine: "I was about ten, and I was hooked; I tore out the photo and still have it" (e-mail interview).

Bara's bizarre, enigmatically ethnic look resonated with the counterculture even though young people may have had no idea who she was. A publicity image of Bara from *Salome* was used as a logo on the masthead of the underground

newspaper *International Times*, established in London in 1966. The countercultural paper's editors reportedly had intended to use an image of Clara Bow, whose designation as "the IT Girl" fit the paper's acronym, but mistakenly used a photo of Bara, instead

("International"). The Bara image was nevertheless retained on into the 2000s, becoming the "face" of the publication. Reinforcing the associations with resistance and rebellion, the cover of a one-issue related

publication, *International Free Press* (Nov. 1969),

featured a photomontage of Bara as Cleopatra aiming a

pistol at the reader (Figure 3.12) ("International Times Archive").



Figure 3.12

Nineteen-sixties countercultural associations make Bara's recurring presence in rock music imagery and culture seem less unexpected. I would argue, in fact, that since punk music's ascendance into cultural significance in the late 1970s, up until widespread general usage of the World Wide Web in the late 1990s, rock culture was the principal conduit through which new audiences were introduced to Bara and/or the vamp image. Further, these reappearances and

recontextualizations serve as examples for rock music fans of how pop culture materials can be repurposed to create new meanings and new forms of cultural critique.

One recurring reuse of her image has been as a point of comparison, exemplified by the persistence in rock criticism of evoking Bara to signify sexual allure that is at once overpowering and freakish. A *Rolling Stone* review of the T. Rex album *The Slider* (Oct. 12, 1972), for example, devoted considerable space to critiquing the record sleeve photo of the group's androgynous lead singer Marc Bolan, opining that the glam rock star "looks like a silent film star, a tossed (sic) Theda Bara, a black-haired scarecrow Lillian Gish" (S. Davis). A 1984 review of a live performance by the Pretenders describes lead singer Chrissie Hynde's stage persona as being "as much a vamp as Theda Bara" (Arnold), and a 2003 review of a Yeah Yeah Yeahs performance refers to lead singer Karen O "vamping across the stage like a punk rock Theda Bara" (Mirkin). Across a four-decade span, these critics and columnists apparently anticipated that a readership interested in current popular music would also understand the reference to a pre-World War I film star, and the connotations associated with her image.

Demonstrating the sort of media erudition that allows for the assemblage of idiosyncratically satisfying tastes chosen from a wide range of media artifacts, at least a segment of rock music audiences *do* grasp such allusions to Bara, in turn perpetuating her iconicity as "edgy" enough to signify cultural rebelliousness and unapologetic sexuality. As recently as 2010, visitors responding to a blog entry on "fashion appropriation" by Lady Gaga referenced Bara in their commentary and critique. Lady Gaga, one of the most recent pop stars to cultivate a highly unique image, complicates the standard hyper-sexualized image of the blonde girl singer by juxtaposing and often undoing eroticism with camp, exaggeration, shock, and peculiarity bordering on and sometimes spilling over into the grotesque. Discussing Lady Gaga's image, a

informant going by the name Xtine comments, “I’ve noticed Gaga’s borrowing habits go all the way back to referencing Theda Bara. It’s like watching a pop-culture puzzle—and though I agree that she needs to be original as possible... I think she borrows deliberately—perhaps indifferent to whether or not we get her references.” The author of the original post responded, “I love the Theda Bara reference, which is theater/performative, a great model and mentor for Gaga” (Nancy). That these comments appear on a website that labels itself “a group blog about sex & consent made by you”<sup>20</sup> suggests something about the significance of popular female stars, from Bara to Gaga, to female audiences, and the perhaps unexpected weight of signification that these star images can bear.

Music and performers, according to Hodkinson, were “most directly responsible” for goth style, and also contributed significantly to Bara’s remembrance and her availability to audiences for repurposing. Appreciation of silent-era film stars is hardly a trend associated with punk, but accrued subcultural capital as goth evolved out of punk, and goth’s fascination with style and the past. Hodkinson cites the band Siouxsie and the Banshees as exemplifying the bridge from punk to goth (35). As perhaps the most recognizable female star to emerge from punk’s cultural fomentation in 1970s Britain, Siouxsie Sioux, the band’s vocalist, has an established history of eliciting shock through both her music and her visual style. Her trademark wild black hair, heavily applied Cleopatra eye makeup, and dramatic costuming were easily read as signifiers of a vibrantly counter-hegemonic attitude and affirmation of the freakish (Figure 3.13). One of the most iconic figures in goth, Siouxsie has also manifested some of the most unambiguous stylistic references to Bara in rock culture.

In a 1984 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, Siouxsie indicated that her widely imitated visual style was inspired in part by Bara. A photograph of the star accompanying

the interview bears a caption that identifies her as “the model for the ‘new glitterati,’” and further notes that this role model for disaffected young women “thinks women looked better in the silent film era” (Atkinson T72). In the body of the story, interviewer Terry Atkinson writes “Her look, she says, comes largely from stars of the silent films such as Theda Bara,” and quotes Siouxsie as saying “I just love the way women looked at that time. They were more decadent days. It’s so boring now, with this influx of blond pop groups. It’s too... *healthy*” (T72).



**Figure 3.13**

Siouxsie’s admiration of decadence and criticism of “healthy” pop performers reflects the punk/goth conviction that music-oriented subcultures should seek to undermine rather than support conventionality. One means of doing so was through the cultivation of a spectacular, shocking appearance, and Siouxsie’s image in most of the band’s music videos, from “Arabian Knights” in 1981 to “Face to Face” in 1992, and her 2007 solo single “Into a Swan,” harkened back to the vamp. Hannaham refers to Siouxsie “decked out in Theda Bara exotica” in the 1985 video for “Cities in Dust,” a song about the destruction of Pompeii (93). The 1983 music video for “Right Now” by the Creatures, a Siouxsie and the Banshees side project, features what is probably Siouxsie’s most pronounced visual reference to Bara. Dressed in Cleopatra regalia complete with rearing cobra diadem, dangly earrings, and gold collar and armbands, Siouxsie

reclines on a chaise and lip-synchs to a track reminiscent of a 1940s big band dance number (Figure 3.14).

Through such visual references, recontextualized via rock culture, Bara's image, if not her name or her specificity, is retained in at least a subcultural memory. Siouxsie's highly recognizable and imitable appearance means that fans looking to her as a stylistic model are also



**Figure 3.14**

adapting, consciously or not, the visual trappings associated with Bara and other exotic vamps of almost a century earlier. Even remembrances dissociated from Bara have the capacity to lead curious fans to her specifically as they seek out more information on primary objects of attachment such as Siouxsie.

Importantly, the connection between Siouxsie and Bara *does* appear to be recognized and discussed in the goth subculture. For instance, on a discussion board devoted to “Grandparents of goth” on the web forum Gothic.net, an informant going by the name son\_of\_putrefaction remarks, “Theda Bara !! \*\_\*, I don't think we would have a Siouxsie Siouxs (sic) without Theda Bara” (“Grandparents”). The same commentator, on a different discussion board, wrote, “When I first saw a picture of Siouxsie Sioux I thought she was a Theda Bara imitator” (“Favorit”).

Siouxsie's stylistic homage to Bara and the vamp is but one example of the not uncommon evocation of bad, dangerous women, femmes fatales, witches, and vampires amongst “alternative” or “avant-garde” female rock musicians. Even the Lilith Fair, a touring music festival featuring female artists that has been dismissed by some male critics and audiences as

exemplifying the “uncool” softness and sincerity of women rock musicians, invokes the name of a female demon. This kind of allusion to female wickedness again hearkens back to both the visual and promotional image of Bara and the silent-era vamp. Describing Bara as “the American male’s fondest nightmare,” Bram Dijkstra rather bombastically connects her to a host of monsters, villains, and wicked women: “She was the invasive other of everyone’s fears: Salome, Judith, Astarte; Lilith, the lustful, primal Eve who stole semen from sleeping men; Lamia, her daughter, the serpent queen. Semitic, masculinized, she was also Shylock, Svengali, Dracula: Arab Death” (261).

Dijkstra emphatically contends that the vamp image can only ever be a weapon of misogyny, and regards the surface veneer of feminine empowerment in the depiction of the powerful but evil women as all the more pernicious:

A relentlessly repeated fiction all too often becomes a social reality in the long run. The Vampire Woman was a figment of the male misogynistic imagination. To make her a positive erotic-fantasy figure expressive of “female sexuality” or of “the feminine creative imagination” is merely to solidify one of the most meretricious creations of turn-of-the-century misogyny. (284)

Along similar lines, a number of second-wave feminist cultural commentators, such as Molly Haskell in her well-known book *From Reverence to Rape*, have regarded Bara’s vamp image, for all of its pretense of female empowerment, as actually *counter-feminist*, by playing out what they regard as men’s most neurotic fears of the ball-busting bitch. While I agree that it is right to be suspicious of the vamp image, and proceed with caution in analyzing how the image functions, I am also suspicious of any argument that shuts down the possibility of counter-interpretations and de-historicizes how a popular culture figure may be received. Mary Ann

Doane rejects the notion of the femme fatale image as being of feminist use, at least *in itself*. As opposed to Dijkstra and Haskell, however, she does not dismiss the polysemy of the image, and the capacity for individual interpretations to result in counter-readings. Although the femme fatale is “not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism,” Doane points out that the representation of the type “is not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated, comes to take on a life of its own (2-3).”

Doane’s observation indicates that, in spite of the oppressive ideology contained within the dominant reading of the image, audiences may have interpreted Bara in an entirely different way. Janet Staiger frames the overriding question succinctly: “granted that the vampire can be considered a projection of male fear or hatred of women, what else does the vampire connote?” (*Bad* 149). All this debate revisits the frustratingly familiar obstacle to media scholars wishing to make the case that the on-screen Other, from the monster to the femme fatale to the ethnic type, can be an empowering site of identification—even if that Other must be punished, reformed, or destroyed for the happy ending’s return to normal. As a number of feminist scholars have pointed out, in spite of the undeniably misogynist aspects of the femme fatale type, outright rejection of the image is complicated by the fact that she is typically the strongest, most interesting, most intelligent, and most compelling character within a narrative (Doane 1991; Kaplan, 2008; Kuhn and Radstone, 1990; Paglia, 1991; Staiger 1995). This complication of the vamp image may overshadow whatever “comeuppance” she receives in the narrative, especially for audiences to whom contrariness, nonconformity, or oppositionality is part of self-identification—like goths. The viewing subject’s sense of identity further complicates issues of “correct” versus “incorrect” object choice for identification, and raises compelling questions about the new meanings and uses a spectator may find not just in spite of, but *because of*, a

“bad” object choice. As the Bara fans interviewed later in this chapter indicate, the conscientious choice to identify with the Other can be a self-affirming component of identity work.

Restating this matter, I ask whether the visual and promotional associations with witches, succubi, demonic whores, and assorted other preternaturally bad women, applied to the vamp of the past or the female rock star of the present, can actually challenge misogynist attitudes. In their study of gender issues throughout the history of rock and roll, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press answer with a cautious and qualified “yes” in demonstrating how the merging of witch and vamp/vampire imagery, punk style, and early twentieth century Orientalism, can serve to disarticulate oppressive tropes, which can subsequently be rearticulated as a form of subversive self-creation.

Analyzing a range of visual styles of women rock performers, Reynolds and Press identify a number of stars that they suggest are looking to the historical past for inspiration by invoking “mystical archetypes” and witch imagery as “a glamorous launching pad for reinvention of the self.” Reynolds and Press see this as a “dangerous strategy” because of the established associations of such archetypes, and the erratic readings the rearticulation of old tropes may produce. On the one hand, goddess or witch imagery “runs the risk of consolidating stereotypes... or lapsing into essentialism”; on the other hand, such imagery also shows what women “would be like if they weren’t kept under strict control” (276). Proclaiming “the witch is a model for rock she-rebels” (281), Reynolds and Press discuss a number of female rock stars who have adopted witch imagery as part of their visual and/or musical style. Somewhat contrary to their assessment that such imagery is risky, they appear to find it a strong feminist statement, observing that avant-garde performers such as Lydia Lunch and Diamanda Galás “resurrect the witch as a terrorist against patriarchy” (278) (Figure 3.15).<sup>21</sup>



Reynolds and Price argue that Siouxsie strongly embodies this possibility. They observe that during the most “visible and influential period of her career,” Siouxsie’s look “fused the dominatrix, the vampire and the Halloween witch into a singular form of style terrorism” (282). For Siouxsie, as for her goth fans, the performance of self, particularly through style, was intended to be a statement: “Siouxsie defined punk not in political terms but as ‘disrupting yourself, questioning yourself’” (Reynolds 356). Claiming, in rather dismissive language, that “for Siouxsie and the punkettes, hauteur + couture + sex= rebellion” (305),



**Figure 3.15:** Diamanda Galás

Reynolds and Press maintain nonetheless that Siouxsie’s appropriation of “sexy” imagery, including the exotic black-haired vamp, revealed its artifice as she took pains to transform the trope into something not merely un-erotic but frighteningly belligerent. As they further contend, Siouxsie “invited the voyeuristic gaze only to punish it” in part by combining bared breasts or sadomasochistic fetish garb with trappings of fascism, even wearing a swastika armband (302) as a way of negating the stringent parameters of traditional feminine beauty and forcing observers to recognize the oppressive power inherent in such expectations. Like Reynolds and Press, Keith Negus identifies this strategy by women rock performers as a way of turning “being looked at into an aggressive act” (127).

The question as to whether the juxtaposition of the erotic and the intimidating is an *effective* “strategy,” however, remains open. The matter becomes even more indeterminate when

fans emulate the look and attitude of their favorite female punk and goth stars through acts of performative consumption. As Sarah Berry notes, the distinctions between the commercial uses of a star and the seemingly personalized uses of a star by individuals can be difficult to determine within a consumerist culture (185). This raises legitimate concerns about stars being vehicles of reinforcing rather than undoing dominant ideology and an oppressive status quo, not only in terms of how fans interpret and repurpose a star's image, but perhaps more importantly in relation to how other people interpret fans' acts of performative consumption and emulation. Specifically in the case of women in the goth subculture, does the choice to play up and emphasize one's sexuality through revealing or fetishistic garb represent self-empowerment or self-objectification? In reference to Bara, Gaylyn Studlar writes that she "relied on Orientalist tropes to complicate woman's presumed role in passively satisfying a voyeuristic male gaze" ("Theda" 119), but the matter of "complicating" conventional perceptions is an open-ended prospect.

Understood as a dynamic of questioning and expanding meanings, the act of complicating reveals that outcomes are more varied than may be presumed. While it adds more options to the table, however, it does not necessarily counter or undo conventional, limited, or oppressive ideas and interpretations. Is complicating the matter enough to determine whether a woman's self-presentation as simultaneously sexy, exotic, and frightening constitutes a valid or a false form of empowerment, or whether it's a real choice or a coercion, or whether it challenges or reinforces misogynist fears about women? Obviously there are too many variables and contingencies to arrive at a satisfying answer, but Janice Radway's work adds valuable nuance to the matter. Addressing the ambiguities of reception, Radway makes the case that consumption of even seemingly oppressive, patriarchal romance novels may be "oppositional" for female readers

“because it allows the women to refuse momentarily their self-abnegating social role” (210). She encourages those invested in progressive social change to “learn not to overlook this minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest” (222). In this sense, the central matter is less the direct and measurable political consequences that an act may have, and more about the positive effect that act may have on an individual at a given moment. Such moments, as Radway contends, have significant micro-level ramifications that may also make a difference at the macro-level.

Siouxsie, Galás, and Lunch are hardly exceptional cases in projecting star personae that combine the horrific and the seductive. Many other female rock musicians, particularly those identified or marketed as punk, New Wave, avant-garde, heavy metal, or goth have appropriated elements of the vamp and/or witch image in support of what may or may not be interpreted as a creative and self-determined expression of their sexuality and of feminist politics. Like Siouxsie, many of these performers appear to reclaim the trappings of sexism to parody such “feminine” attributes as eroticism, emotionality, mystery, supernaturalism, and hysteria in such a way as to rearticulate their signification. The list of such performers is extensive, from Stevie Nicks, Nina Hagen, and Lene Lovich in the 1970s to Amy Winehouse, Amy Lee of Evanescence, and Cristina Scabbia of Lacuna Coil more recently. Like Bara for 1910s audiences, these rock performers exemplify how women (either of their own volition or obligated by commercial pressures) might re-present and re-embody conventional signifiers of female attractiveness such as flowing hair, dramatic makeup, and exaggerated sexiness or exoticism as something intimidating or threatening by taking them to an extreme.<sup>22</sup>

The female rock stars discussed here tend to have strong fan followings in the goth music scene and subculture, in which, not coincidentally, women appear to have greater input and a more central role than they typically might in goth’s more macho parent subculture, punk. Goth,

at least on the surface, is also often regarded as more welcoming of LGBT people and gender-nonconformists, encouraging even heterosexual men in the scene to explore and embrace their “feminine side” in dress, hair, and make-up. The appeal of strong, commanding women with a vampish image thus has the capacity to affect goths in a number of potentially positive ways, in terms of demonstrating one’s distinctive or “oppositional” taste, challenging gender norms, incorporating mediated images into the performance of identity and sense of self, or simply deriving pleasure.

We must not forget the implications of the word *potential*, however, in evaluating the individual and cultural effects of repurposing and use of the Bara image. Most responses to Bara and the vamp image undoubtedly fall somewhere between Djikstra’s strident disavowal of her image as anything other than a crushing force of misogyny personified and Fiske’s conviction that “subordinates” have the capacity to alter the social order in their appropriation of popular culture. Assessing the actions that may be prompted by media consumption, Radway argues that the confidence, self-awareness, or assertiveness that some women gain through reading romance novels may not manifest itself in obviously political ways, but also can have less evident benefits, “limited but nonetheless unmistakable and creative ways in which people resist the deleterious effects of their social situations” (218). Notably, one of the informants in Hodkinson’s study affirmed that female musicians connected with goth, such as Siouxsie and Danielle Dax, acted as “a positive encouragement for goth women to take up active roles” (118). And as my own informants indicate, the gothic interpretation of Bara may have the same effects.

## Reclaiming the Vamp: Bara Fans Speak

Since roughly the 1980s, when overt references to Bara in mainstream popular culture became scarce, it has been fans rather than the media (as examined in the previous chapter) that have been the main conduits of replicating and recirculating Bara's image in cultural memory.

Because fans are the agents whose reception of that image has kept it culturally vital enough to be remembered, discovering how current fans of Bara make meaning of that image helps us to understand both the dynamics that make repurposing of popular culture possible, and how fans make use of the media in negotiating a sense of self.

Ethnographic research, like any method, has limitations. As Hills states, analyzing "the affective nature of the fan-text attachment means that 'asking the audience' cannot act as a guarantee of knowledge" (66). While in partial agreement with Hills, I differ greatly on one crucial point: while informants' words do not represent some inviolable *truth*, they always provide some form of *knowledge*. Just as distinguishing truth from fiction in accounts of Bara's life and legend becomes less important than what their inseparability tells us about the meanings and uses of her image, informants' statements provide insight, in one way or another, into the range of meanings popular culture has in peoples' lives. As Staiger argues, "the self-images and personal associations constructed by the reader in the reading event and the relation of those self-images and associations to abstract categories of determination matter more than any theoretical array within which a researcher might be inclined to posit the reader" (*Interpreting* 47). In other words, the use value fans place on, and personal meaning they extract from, their objects of fandom may evade the attention and study of media scholars, but have significant "real life" effects. Such effects may in turn be more observable and open to study, relating less to the "truth" of how an individual responds to, feels about, or finds value in a specific media text, than

to the social, economic, and political impact of media use. Further, Erb contends that in spite of its problems, ethnographic methodology accomplishes something no other reception studies methods can: “it can help us describe viewers as social agents never completely harnessed by the practices of the film industry” (162), or indeed the influences of other media and social institutions. The responses to Bara voiced by the people I interviewed amply illustrate how fans can become this kind of social agent.

Hills maintains that an important part of cult fandom “involves extending the reader-text, or reader-icon, relationship into other areas of fan experience” (22). Leaving aside further discussion of Bara’s cult status until the next chapter, the interviews I conducted with a number of Bara fans demonstrate what forms this extension of the reader-icon relationship can take. I located my informants by searching online, on sites including YouTube , where a number of Bara fans have posted “tribute” videos, and others appear in videos or comment on them; eBay and Etsy, where one informant sells goods decorated with images of Bara; and various online discussion boards (the online activities of Bara fans will be discussed more fully in the next chapter). Informants agreeing to participate in my interviews were initially given a survey asking about their interests and reactions to Bara’s image. The surveys were followed by more in-depth questions based on the responses the informants provided; all interviews were conducted through e-mail. Not all of my informants described themselves as goth, but all were aware of Bara’s appeal to the subculture, and all indicated they had other interests besides Bara that were of a “gothic” nature.

In a 1917 interview printed in *Fox Exhibitor’s Bulletin*, Bara stated, “Women are my greatest fans” (May 106), and the fact that all of my informants are women indicates that it holds true today. My informants are Tempest, a thirty-one-year old artist, designer, dancer, and

instructor from New Jersey; Bathory Carpathia, twenty-seven, from Nevada; Rachel, twenty-six, a nursing student in Tennessee; Astrid, a twenty-four-year old MBA student from Georgia; Hala Pickford, a twenty-two-year old living in Hollywood and producer of a website dedicated to silent films; Harriet, a twenty-year old film studies student in London; Regina, age twenty, who did not reveal her location; and flapper girl, a nineteen-year old student in France.<sup>23</sup> While Bara's publicity in the 1910s implied that both her appeal and her affront to women derived from her standard role as the femme fatale wrecking indiscriminate vengeance on the male sex for its subjugation and mistreatment of women, my interviewees responded almost exclusively to what they regarded as the empowering potential of Bara's modeling of independence, confidence, defiant sexuality, and refusal to capitulate to institutionalized sexism—a response that was *pro-woman* rather than anti-man.

The extra effort required to be a Bara fan may “pay off” in terms of subcultural capital in certain fields, but most of my informants emphasized affective connection or simply piqued curiosity as the motivation behind cultivating knowledge about and a taste for Bara. While some of the informants I interviewed communicated awareness that their enactments of Bara fandom performed a memory-preservation or even epistemological function by informing others of who she was, these aspects of Bara's draw appeared secondary to the affective attachments that the interviewees expressed finding in Bara's image and biography. In particular, my informants seemed especially responsive to Bara's unconventionality in look and attitude, the contradiction between the wicked seductress onscreen and the bookish homebody offscreen (indicating both the complexity and performativity of feminine identity), and what they typically regard as the proto-feminist (though not unproblematic) connotations of her star image and life story.

Aside from flapper girl, who reported that her interest in silent-era stars sprang from getting her hair cut like Louise Brooks, most of my other informants said that they had discovered Bara in an educational context, either institutionally or as autodidacts researching out of general interest. Astrid, for instance, said that she first learned of Bara during a college film class, while Harriet discovered Bara in a class she took for her A-level exams. Regina responded that she discovered Bara from watching a documentary about horror films. Bara was only briefly mentioned, “but I couldn’t forget that photo and that name and shortly afterwards I did some research to find out more about her.” Two informants reported that a pre-existing interest in silent film led them to Bara. Carpathia, who said that she has been a fan of silent film since she was “a very small child,” stumbled upon Bara searching online: “I loved what I read about her and wanted to see her movies. I watched *A Fool There Was* and it left me obsessed.” Pickford, too, said she probably discovered Bara web surfing, but that she had also “surely read about her” in books on silent film.

Affirming Bara’s connection to goth, most of my informants spoke of her physical appearance. Tempest, admiring Bara’s “reputation as ‘The Vamp,’ and her very goth-looking appearance,” said that Bara holds an allure “without the heaps of cheese that you get from [1980s television personality] Elvira and similar more modern characters.” Rachel said she believed the reason Bara’s image has been “embraced by the goth culture” is because of her pale complexion, dark hair, and dark eyes, “which is a looks (sic) that appeals to many goths.” Likewise, Harriet spoke of Bara’s “dark and alternative aesthetics” as part of the attraction, but added, “Being somewhat into Goth culture myself, it seems likely that I would see more of a Goth image in her than someone who does not identify with Goth culture.” Bara’s make-up and costuming, plus the association of vamps with vampires, are among the other reasons my informants listed for Bara’s



appeal to a goth sensibility. As we'll see, however, the personal value placed on Bara goes much deeper than her style and her appearance.

The sometimes surprisingly passionate responses to Bara expressed by some interviewees underscore the vitality of affect and its intersection with taste in the construction and realization of a sense of self. Further, these responses also indicate what kind of influence the resulting sensibility exerts on the individual's subsequent interaction with the media. Pronouncing Bara "one of my favourite actresses and people," Regina referred to the star as "a wonderful inspiration to me" and "just naturally a big part of my life," adding, "I want to know everything about her.... I just feel that someone that was so fantastic on screen, and dared to try something new like that, deserves my attention." Carpathia said that Bara "has been my inspiration and idol since I was a teenager," and that "she shows me through confidence, poise, elegance, beauty, and chaos what it is to be a real woman." Tempest, described on her website as "the most recognized name associated with the art of Gothic & Steampunk Bellydance in North America and across the world" ("About Tempest"), names Bara in a video interview posted on YouTube as a "personal idol" and a "saint" ("Gilded Serpent"). When I asked her to elaborate on this, Tempest responded, "Theda is an idol in the sense of someone who inspires me, and whom I hold in great esteem.... I just feel like I can really relate to who she really was, and who she tried to be on screen and in the media. I don't think I can put into words how much she means to me." Tempest expressed some surprise at her depth of feeling for Bara, relating how she "burst into tears" when being denied access to the mausoleum where Bara is interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California:

I'm not one to cry.... And there I was, bawling. It hurt me to think that because Theda had no children, no close living relatives, and she's been pretty much

forgotten, there's no one to visit her grave. It's adding insult to injury I think, considering most of her work is gone forever. That causes me pain for her sake.

Affect and emotion also factor into Bara fandom through the sense of distinction and difference it proffers. Although Getz replied that she found Bara to be “such an icon as a femme fatale that it would be difficult to avoid seeing her face anywhere in the Western world, at the very least,” it does seem that for current day audiences, knowing of Bara is a *specialized* knowledge. When I asked my informants if they felt their interest in Bara somehow set them apart, a number connected a sense of distinction from knowing about Bara with the subcultural capital that comes from being a fan of silent film. Carpathia answered, “It takes a very special type of person in this day and age to seek out and have interest in watching silent film,” saying that they are more demanding and don’t allow a viewer to “zone out” like “movies today.” Pickford also said that her interest in silent film stars “would definitely set me apart from people my age,” contrasting herself with her best friend, “who enjoys all the stupid action films out.” In this sense, Bara fandom may carry more prestige amongst goths than fandom for old stars of sound films, such as Garbo or Dietrich, because it implies a cultivated taste for something perceived as more than just populist entertainment.

Knowledge of Bara is also a specialized knowledge that says much about class privilege, particularly in terms of (sub)cultural and educational capital; recall that some of my informants spoke of learning of Bara in higher educational contexts. Just as scholars such as Jeffery Sconce and Mark Jancovich have pointed out that cult fandom is a distinctly bourgeois taste formation, goth is as well, along with other movements and subcultures requiring the time and resources (access to books, films, home theater equipment, computers, Internet connection, cable television, archives and libraries, etc.) to seek out “alternative,” obscure, or historical popular

culture artifacts. As Budd indicates, the historical references encountered within the intertext surrounding a given text are “selective and interested” within a field of “cultural options limited by social and economic restraints” (105). Referencing a cartoon from the *New Yorker*, which required the specialized knowledge of the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1919) to be understood, Budd regards this as a “cultural *representation* of social relations” contingent upon class and educational privilege (106).

Although Bara fandom is undoubtedly linked to class, and may be symptomatic of certain class inequalities, the extended applications of her image my informants spoke of suggest that appreciation of Bara can also enable progressive cultural work concerning *gender* inequalities. Most of my interviewees appear to respond to Bara precisely because they see her as defiant of oppressive conventions, with many seeing her as a trailblazer for various aspects of women’s independence and liberation. When asked why she thought goth and other subcultures are drawn to Bara’s image, Astrid replied, “She has an image and a look that was ahead of her time and that transcends the era she came from. The look is highly dramatized and free-spirited—unconstrained by the morality of the times she lived in.” Carpathia also referred to Bara as “definitely ahead of her time,” a “taboo subject” who “broke down barriers and in my opinion helped to liberate women.” Tempest expressed similar thoughts: “I think she helped revolutionize the concept of womanhood—that being a woman could mean more than being obedient, docile, and well-behaved.” Pickford called Bara “my hero” because “her character was unabashedly new and unrepentant,” and specifically referenced Bara’s man-killing, home-wrecking role in *A Fool There Was*: “In a time when women were supposed to be docile and housewives and mothers her character was the evil opposite.... Unlike almost every other silent film were (sic) the bad lady must learn a lesson in the end Theda's vamp didn't.” Pickford

expressed admiration for Bara's persona because "she equalized the game between women and men," adding, "We still need vamps as much as we ever did to level the playing field out."

As this indicates, a number of my informants regarded Bara as symbolic of a certain kind of feminist liberation that is particularly appealing to a gothic sensibility, notably in that Bara's image is interpreted as an affirmation of transgression and women's freedom to choose how they dress, behave, and think, regardless of social constraints. This includes choices about sexuality. According to Wilkins, sexual "sophistication" and adventurousness are encouraged as part of the goth identity. Participants generally regard the goth scene as a "neofeminist space," and while double standards are still evident (particularly in relation to the sexualization and display of female bodies rather than male bodies), goths at least on the surface "celebrate their personal and collective emancipation from the gender inequalities that plague other settings" (Wilkins 55).

Part of this includes women participants feeling free to express their sexuality through dress and behavior. There may be some connection here to self-identification with the vamp, the Other, or even the monstrous, as a conscious choice with goths. Noting that the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s prompted conservative critics to denounce "sexually liberated women as unnatural monsters" and a threat to the family and established order, W. Scott Poole describes the new focus on achieving sexual fulfillment as "a celebration of personal agency and autonomy" for women (171). Within the goth subculture, as Wilkins contends, such assertion of "sexual agency" ostensibly contributes to women's sense of strength and independence (55).

A number of my informants appear to hold similar views to those detailed by Wilkins, leading Bara to be repurposed as the model for an empowering "alternative" femininity that includes self-expression of sexuality. Saying that she was drawn to Bara's "dark, seductive and

exotic” femme fatale image, Rachel reported that it was her interest in burlesque that led her to Bara, who “is listed in the burlesque hall of fame” and who has inspired the look and performance style of current day burlesque performers such as Deanna Danger (Figures 3.16; 3.17). Astrid told me that “Theda Bara... transcended gender stereotypes, and her strength is popular in a time of ‘girl power’ and the third wave of feminism.” She continued by saying that she sees Bara as a “positive feminist statement, because she went against the grain of her time and was a little ‘dangerous’ to the conventional images of femininity.” Further, she added



**Figure 3.16:** Deanna Danger performing her “Theda Bara Tribute”



**Figure 3.17:** Deanna Danger in another Bara-based burlesque act. She captioned this photo “The infamous pose (although my skeleton was less real)” (see Figures 3.6 and 3.7).

I disagree with the idea that provocative images of women are automatically “degrading” or “objectifying.” If an individual is an adult and consenting, she should be able to do as she wishes with her body and image. For a woman to be sexual on film, in a still image, or anything else, as long as that particular woman

feels “good” about her decision, I don’t believe she is being degraded. It all depends on the individual.

As with all things related to sexuality, however, the ideological intonation of women, from Bara to goths, presenting themselves as an erotic spectacle is far from simple. Although many of her informants seemed to find such “postfeminist” sexual self-presentation liberating and exciting, Wilkins also suggests that there’s an “absence of choice” in this matter, with “authentic” goth identity being tied to “sexual dress and sexual play,” whether women participants actually wish to partake in this aspect of the subculture or not (67). Determining whether sexual dress and play contribute to or erode self-determination and true empowerment is a matter far too complex to pursue using only goth or Bara as a frame of reference. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that this indeterminacy is always a factor in performative consumption, and that each instance is its own set of negotiations within its own context.

Likewise, the question of whether Bara and the vamp are helpful or harmful to women’s concerns exceeds simple answers. A productive inquiry into that matter, though, may come from looking at how my informants find use in Bara’s image that includes but also extends beyond the sexual. One such use of Bara is as an embodiment of “alternative beauty.” Alternative beauty, the inability or disinclination to model oneself according to standards of attractiveness felt to be oppressive,<sup>24</sup> is a notable way in which goth purports to celebrate women’s agency and liberation—although as Wilkins indicates, highly conventional attitudes towards beauty and body size lie just below the surface (67). Nonetheless, my informants frequently expressed admiration for Bara’s daring in the display of her body, remarking both on how bold it was for the time period, and on the fact that Bara’s body size does not match current conventional standards of beauty. Carpathia, for instance, noted that she finds Bara and other silent-era

actresses to be “the epitome of a beautiful woman,” in part because “they were not too skinny,” whereas standards of beauty today cause many women to feel bad about their bodies. Rachel said that she thinks Bara’s “very glamorous and risqué” costuming “appeals to goths, because they like to look different from others and perhaps shock people a little, to get people out of their comfort zones. Much like Theda did in her day.” Rachel adds she regards Bara’s image as “a powerful feminist statement” because she “represents a woman in control of her sexuality.... (W)ho is not ashamed of her body or of being assertive when it comes to sex and men.”

Attribution of these traits to Bara may be a matter of wishful or romanticized thinking: it’s highly improbable that Bara’s wearing of skimpy costumes and playing sexualized film roles were meant as a statement, let alone anything that she herself chose to do. As with virtually all contract-players under the studio system, Bara would have had very little control over her mode of representation. I would argue, however, that this is a case in which revisionist memories of Bara, influenced by the affective attachment of fans, along with their changing socio-political outlooks, ties in with the repurposing of the past as a means of constructing one’s sense of identity. The retrospective attribution of feminist agency and sexual liberation to Bara may in some ways be a kind of self-affirmation for her new fans, in which their strategies for reading and repurposings media texts reinforce a desired sense of self, with their tastes and their choices interpreted as an expression of that ideal self.

The appeal of Bara’s image to a goth sensibility, as expressed by some of my informants, is not just about the sexy, exotic vamp, but also about the Bara/Goodman contrast, and her ability to perform seemingly incompatible identities. This embodiment of dichotomy may be especially attractive to goths, in light of Wilkins’s claim that many reinvented themselves “from geek to freak,” in a way that might recall Goodman’s transformation into Bara. DeWitt Bodeen

commented that the opposition of Bara's onscreen persona to her offscreen behavior was "one of life's little ironies" (282), and for some current day fans the multiple ironic contrasts within the Bara persona are among the most compelling draws to her image. The appreciation for irony may relate to the wry assessment of the dominant discourse and appropriation of cultural artifacts so much a part of goth and other ostensibly oppositional subcultures. Acknowledging the camp and theatrical aspects of goth (111), Spooner observes there is a tendency in goth culture to be self-reflexively "knowing," so that participants become "aware of the conventions" of the genre, but at the same time are apt to "subject them to critical scrutiny and ironic investigation" (103).

Demonstrating such a "knowing" application of cultural materials, a number of fans I interviewed spoke of negotiating a sense of self in which one's outer persona comprises an "ironic" contrast to the way one regards her private interior life. For some of these fans, determining this balance is a way of challenging conventions, and perhaps undoing the false dichotomy that pushes women into either the "good girl" or the "bad girl" category. Tempest, for instance, said, "I feel very much akin to (Bara), and when I read her biography, was struck by many similar parallels in both of our lives." The "personal correlation" she feels with the star stems in part from projecting/performing a spectacular image that is frequently misinterpreted by conventional social perceptions that dictate how one is "supposed" to look and be:

People who don't know me... seem to think I'm this crazy wildwoman looking for shock value and defacing bellydance—perhaps I put babies on stakes and drink blood as well while I'm at it. While in truth, I'm a rather quiet and reserved individual who works earnestly to study tradition and carefully constructs my work with artistic and cultural sensibilities. I'm not a big party-goer, I'm not into the social-drama of "the scene" or its inherent two-dimensionality.



I argue that statements such as Tempest's indicate how Bara, other stars, and other aspects of popular culture can contribute to the ongoing identity work in which all of us engage—in this case, affirming the individualistic way one chooses to live by regarding Bara as a predecessor in somewhat similar circumstances. Rather than seeing the distinction between outer image and inner self as confirmation of an inherent or authentic self-identity, Tempest and other informants appeared to regard the divide between interior and exterior as an opportunity for identity play and experimentation through appearance.

Various aspects of goth cultural identity—re-imagining and reinventing the past, self-expression through appearance, manner, and self-sexualization, appreciation of “alternative” beauty—synthesize dramatically in the gothic belly dance movement. The costuming and self-presentation of many performers involved in gothic belly dance reflect the subculture's attitudes about display of the body being a form of self-liberation, allowing women to “reclaim” risky tropes of femininity such as exoticism, mystery, and sensuality on what they feel are their own terms. Thus, the webpage of a gothic belly dance instructor in the United Kingdom promotes the movement as “a means for building self-empowerment, expression, and creativity” (“Sera Solstice”). Other actions frequently associated with goth, such as performing “freaky” identity, claiming marginal space, and voluntary separation from the mainstream are also in evidence:

Tempest's instructional DVD, for instance, is titled *Bellydance for Beautiful Freaks*.

Not surprisingly, interest in Bara in the goth belly dance movement is high. Documentarian Hugh Munro Neely described the visual style of gothic belly dance as “a fascinating mash-up,” whose performers “seem to be very interested in the various poses Theda uses in production photographs” from *Cleopatra* and *Salome* (e-mail interview). Tempest said she collects photos of Bara because they are “greatly influential in costuming, posture,



**Figure 3.18**

presentation, and attitude,” and a performer featured on a goth belly dance DVD named Laura Rose is costumed and styled in a way highly reminiscent of Bara’s Cleopatra (*Gothic Bellydance*) (Figure 3.18). The home page of the Gothic Belly Dance Resource Website features one of Richard Avedon’s photos of Marilyn Monroe costumed as Bara (discussed in Chapter Two), and images of Bara appear on the steampunk belly dance website *The Gypsy Kiss*,

in an article about using humor to “keep

audiences awake” (“Kiss”).<sup>25</sup> Rearticulating a loaded image such as Bara’s in this way does not by itself undo the misogynistic, Orientalist fantasy that it might perpetuate, yet could be construed as a feminist act of intervention into the way representations of “exotic” women are most likely to be interpreted.

The kind of repurposing of star image in gothic belly dance’s use of Bara exemplifies interpretation put into action as identity performance. Advocating Kurt Lancaster’s model of analyzing fans as textual *performers* (rather than textual poachers, as with Michel de Certeau and Henry Jenkins), Hills argues that this revised way of thinking shifts the focus from the text-reader interaction to “the myriad ways that fans can engage with the textual structures and moments” of their objects of fandom, leading to a “reactivation” of that engagement through “cultural practices of play” (41). Importantly, “reactivations” can also contribute to cultural memory. Tempest’s story of how she first came to know about Bara describes one way this

cultural work plays out. After one of her performances, “Two separate women came up to me...and told me how much I reminded them of Theda Bara” Tempest said, adding, “at the time, I had no idea who she was, so I looked her up. That was the beginning.”

I find this significant in that it is an instance in which an individual was performing (quite literally, in this case) a certain set of stylized traits and images that evoked the remembrance of Bara by others, without being aware herself of the actress. As I’ve argued, I believe that



**Figure 3.19:** Still from the YouTube video “Gilded Serpent presents: Tempest tells of her Theda Tattoo.”

iterations of star image still have the capacity to preserve media heritage even when disconnected from a specific star. In this case, it doesn’t matter that Tempest was not intentionally referring to Bara; what matters is that her persona called Bara to mind in others, who in turn further “preserved” the memory of the star by telling the dancer about her. In turn, Tempest’s reactivation of the Bara image and her performance of Bara

fandom are a cultural mnemonic, serving both preservationist and epistemological functions. In a YouTube video in which she appears, Tempest shows off a tattoo of Bara on her upper arm (Figure 3.19). When I asked what kind of reactions she has gotten to the tattoo, which she describes as “rather large and visible,” she replied

No matter where I have traveled in the world...people always seem to be greatly impressed with my Theda tattoo.... Most people don't have any idea who Theda

was, and considering we look alike... a lot of people assume it's me. So I have to explain, no, I'm not that vain, and give the two-minute mini-lecture on Theda.

As Tempest's anecdote indicates, performative consumption as it links to identity is likely to entail one's choices in dress, appearance, and style, ranging from commonplace signifiers such as badges and T-shirt to tattoos or other forms of body modification. Carpathia, who also has a tattoo of Bara (which she says is based on a cover portrait from a 1916 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine*), described responses similar to the ones Tempest related. "I do find myself having to constantly educate people about her when they see my tattoo," she said, "but that is ok because I've opened a lot of eyes to this forgotten star. Some think she's not that pretty, and others find her as mesmerizing as I do." She added that she had recently been asked by her manager at work who "the gorgeous lady tattooed on my arm" was.

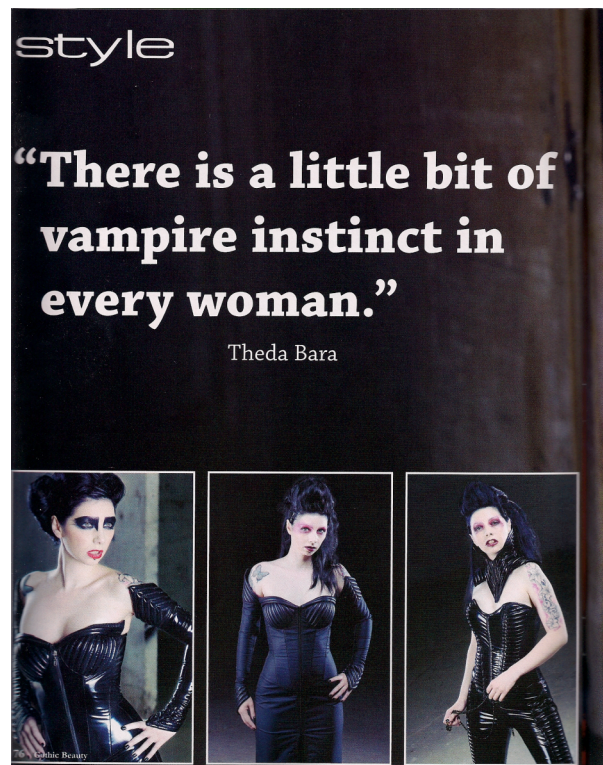
Wilkins refers to the body as the principle locus of goth's deployment of freakiness (31), but examples such as Tempest and Carpathia demonstrate how embodiment of fandom and goth identity also makes the body an archive. Because goth style is typically spectacular, and because it so often combines varying elements borrowed from pop cultural imagery both past and present, personal appearance and the performance of fandom, intentionally or not, acts as a kind of cultural repository, with the fan as *bricoleur* transforming the body into an indicator of the fluidity and play of cultural memory. Tattooing is a very literal instance of writing fandom on the body, but this can take many other and less permanent forms that make the body a field of play and experimentation as well as an archive. Pickford told of an incident when a cashier at a Starbucks, a woman about Pickford's own age, complimented her on a vintage jacket she was wearing which was emblazoned with an image of Bara's face. "I thanked her and said 'It's Theda

Bara...she was a very early film star.” Pickford said the cashier asked, “Oh, like from the 1930s?” because she “couldn’t believe film went back farther than that.”

A quote from Bara accompanies a fashion spread dedicated to black vinyl garb in a goth style magazine, informing readers, “There is a little bit of vampire instinct in every woman” (“Style” 76) (Figure 3.20). That this quote appears in thirty-six-point boldface type indicates the magazine’s editors must have deemed it an attractive idea to its readership. Indeed a number of my informants did seem to respond to Bara because they see her as an indication of the various social guises with which one may experiment, playing out the “inner vampire” when desired, working

elements of that image into a sense of self, but recognizing it as a *performance*.

While my informants knew Bara’s varying guises were obviously part of being an actress, some of their responses indicated a knowing, ironic appreciation of the performativity of identity. Pickford, for instance, referred to the “kitsch” aspect of Bara’s image, particularly that no matter what role Bara was cast in, she still had “that look.” Others spoke of their interest in the seeming contrasts of Bara’s image, and amusement in her ability *and* inability to convincingly perform various facets of a public identity. Regina said that part of her fascination with Bara was the diversity of her appearance in surviving publicity images, “almost like a



**Figure 3.20:** *Gothic Beauty Magazine*, Issue 25 (Spring 2008), page 76

different person,” at times “beautiful and so radiant,” at times “comical,” and at others “frightening.” The aspect of Bara’s appeal most frequently cited by my informants is her perceived self-confidence and strength, which were seen as inseparable from her Otherness. As Carpathia put it, goths are attracted to Bara because of “her imagery, her state of mind, her seductive qualities, even down to her poise and confidence,” all of which are “very desirable for gothic women.” “Anything with her image on it,” Carpathia added, “inspires women to be tough and assertive.”

In rejecting even the possibility that Bara’s image can be interpreted and used in empowering ways, Dijkstra writes, “Theda Bara, the mystical—yet levelheaded—feminist of the 1920, would no doubt be dumbfounded to find her vampire ‘role playing’ (that economically expedient concession to male fantasies) being turned into a form of ‘self-expression’ by some of today’s ‘revisionist’ feminists” (Dijkstra 283). Less concerned with imagining what Bara might have thought, my interest lies in letting those “‘revisionist’ feminists” speak for themselves. Gauging the socio-political realities of audience use of the media is a tricky matter, but as my informants have indicated, Bara fandom exceeds revisionist memory of the star as a feminist symbol, and entails adaptation of aspects of her image that foster a sense of self and self worth with “real life” consequences.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued, using the rearticulation of Bara’s image in the goth subculture as my case study, that repurposing the past is a form of identity work in which the modification and adaptation of archaic artifacts are undertaken by fans to obtain a sense of satisfaction, distinction, pleasure, and connection in how they construct their sense of self and their place in the world. Asking the important questions of why audiences remember some media texts and not others,

why some individuals feel a deep enough affective connection with particular text to become a fan, and what use fans make of their favored texts, can yield no definitive conclusions. While certainly fans hold sustained likes, with lasting psychological, affective, and identity-forming ramifications, the relation between fan and object of fandom is always too contingent, too negotiable, too in process, and too interior to tell us more than a partial story about that interaction at one specific moment in one specific place.

By way of conclusion, however, I briefly revisit what the words of my informants tell us about fan use of star image, and the meaning stars may have in the lives of audiences. Two principal uses of stars by fans come through in their responses: stars can show us something new (even if that star is old) that may alter or expand how we see ourselves and others; stars can also affirm the ways we already see ourselves, or indicate ways we may enhance traits we already see in ourselves. Of course, there is no inherent “good” or “bad” to this interaction; fans may use stars in ways that are not self-beneficial, that increase self-doubts and social anxieties. Because my selection of informants was determined by those who had already made a public declaration of their appreciation of Bara’s image, however, my conclusions are skewed to the more positive ways fans may make use of the stars they favor.

Goth is so amenable to various contemporary cultural theories, according to Spooner, because “its components can be reordered in infinite combinations” in order to “provide a lexicon that can be plundered for a hundred different purposes” (156). Perhaps goth’s invitation to plunder and reorder and to be made to fit into various contexts has predisposed those interested in goth to apply this process of cultural bricolage to other aspects of their lives. As indicated by my informants, the repurposing of Bara’s image by extracting goth attributes from it can become a way of reordering the performance of self, of accepting or even cultivating a self-

affirming freakiness that transforms feelings of difference into distinction. Perhaps the most recurring theme in my informants' words is that they have found in Bara's image a means of empowerment. Whether this empowerment represents some progressive, liberatory act of resistance with measurable political effect is debatable. My informants' responses, however, clearly indicate that matters of fandom, taste, affect, identity, and repurposing are far more complex than one frame of analysis can encompass. Separating fandom from political concerns of what "empowerment" might entail at a macro-level, and focusing instead on empowerment at the individual affective level, with affect's capacity to reactivate the reader-text dynamic and encourage play, then we gain all the more insight into the why of remembrance and the use value fans find in their objects of fandom.

Goth fans of Bara may not consciously be thinking about future generations, but their performance of taste and incorporation of popular culture into a sense of identity are preservative actions, increasing the potential for Bara to be remembered and discovered in various other contexts. Bara's iconicity in goth has undoubtedly increased her availability for revised or reinterpreted cultural meaning even outside the subculture. This represents a broadening of horizons of expectations, that while ostensibly about finding alternative popular cultural artifacts to like and append to one's sense of self, may also represent an expansion of ways of thinking about agency, identity, and affect in various social, political, and cultural contexts. One expansion of the text-reader interaction is the conscientious participation of some fans in cultural discourse by taking an active role in curating, archiving, or reworking images and information as tangible media artifacts. Fan practice of this sort will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> K. Southworth, Letter to Hedda Hopper. August 11, 1965, Hedda Hopper Papers, Theda Bara file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In this letter, “airline hostess” describes encountering Bara as a passenger in 1935.

<sup>2</sup> There does not seem to be a fixed rule as to whether “goth,” referring to the contemporary youth subculture (as opposed to the Germanic tribes of the Dark Ages, medieval architecture, or the eighteenth-century literary development) is capitalized or not. I am following the lead of Paul Hodkinson and Amy C. Wilkins’s work on the subculture by *not* capitalizing goth/gothic/goths. I have retained the capitalized form of the word when directly citing other sources, including my interview informants, but when the capitalized word “Gothic” appears outside citations, it should be understood that I am using it to refer to Gothic as a film and literary genre, while goth signifies the subculture.

<sup>3</sup> Entering into the long-standing discussion about the meaning and use of the word “subculture” would take me too far a field from my primary object of study. My use of the word “subculture” should be understood in the basic terms set out by Sarah Thornton: “I use the term ‘subcultures’ to identify taste cultures which are labeled by media as subcultures and the word ‘subcultural’ as a synonym for those practices” labeled “underground” or non-mainstream by its participants (8).

<sup>4</sup> Goth became a subject of national scrutiny, for instance, in 1999 when some news reports labeled Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the teenage boys who killed thirteen people and themselves in the Columbine High School massacre, as goths because they were reportedly fans of Marilyn Manson, Rammstein, KMFDM, and other bands tangentially associated with goth. The moral panic generated by goth is demonstrated most emphatically in the Parents Against Goth organization’s website “God Hates Goths.” Both the organization and the site, according to a disclaimer, are “meant to be viewed as black humor, parody and satire on very real people and organizations out there, who DO think Goth and metal is (sic) the devil’s music” (“Disclaimer”).

<sup>5</sup> In his ethnographic study of the goth movement in the United Kingdom, Hodkinson concludes that the goth aesthetic is not a reflection of a particular emotional state, but about allegiance to the group identity. Further, he notes a “tendency for hostility” in his informants towards the presumption that goth style was a reflection of depressive or angst-ridden “character, outlook or behaviour” (62).

<sup>6</sup> This is bluntly confirmed by an interviewee in a video on the *Gothus.com* website, who says, “It’s a middle class scene, basically. You need the money to be able to afford the dressing up, the going out, the social life” (Untitled video).

<sup>7</sup> Writing that Rubinstein “turned to Hollywood for promotional help by designing the Orientalist eye makeup” Bara wore in *A Fool There Was*, Sarah Berry regards use of cosmetics in film as having played a significant part in expanding standards of beauty for American moviegoers: “With their heavy, seductive eyes and ‘vampire lips,’ Hollywood silent-film stars like Bara, Nita Naldi, Pola Negri, and Alla Nazimova successfully challenged American norms of childlike beauty epitomized by Dorothy and Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford” (185).

<sup>8</sup> Many bands with a devoted goth following, or at least stereotypically linked to goth fandom, came to prominence in the 1980s: Joy Division, the Cure, Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Sisters of Mercy, Christian Death, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and the Damned. More recent goth-associated bands such as the Dresden Dolls, Black Tape for a Blue Girl, Evanescence, Lacuna Coil, Switchblade Symphony, Rasputina, and the Birthday Massacre, are notable for having a strong female presence, often involving appropriation of the vamp image.

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<sup>9</sup> Outside the horror genre, some films with goth followings include *Harold and Maude* (Ashby, 1971), *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *The Piano* (Campion, 1993), *The Crow* (Proyas, 1994), *Moulin Rouge!* (Luhrmann, 2001), and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001); films with well-rounded goth characters such as *Gypsy 83* (Stephens, 2001), *My First Mister* (Lahti, 2001), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev, 2009; Fincher, 2011); and works by directors such as Tim Burton, David Lynch, Guillermo del Toro, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, Roman Polanski, Jan Švankmajer, Stephen and Timothy Quay, Guy Maddin, and Peter Greenaway.

<sup>10</sup> Although a number of my informants voiced a similar appreciation of the absence of repercussion in Bara's films, I believe this assessment derives almost exclusively from the fact that *A Fool There Was* is Bara's only readily available film. Although that narrative ends with a triumphant vamp mockingly strewing flower petals on her dying "fool," the sketchy plot synopses of several other films indicate that her characters more often *did* meet violent deaths as "payback" for their wicked, wanton ways. In the film *Destruction* (1915), for example, Bara's character burns to death in a house fire (Golden, *Vamp* 76).

<sup>11</sup> Proclaiming "Subcultural pleasure is empowering pleasure" (*Reading* 117), Fiske locates a discursive pleasure in the "making meanings versus accepting ready-made ones" (*Understanding* 49), and in producing meanings "that are both relevant and functional" in negotiating one's everyday life and sense of self (*Understanding* 57).

<sup>12</sup> Burne-Jones was the son of the better-known painter and Pre-Raphaelite luminary Edward Burne-Jones, who himself painted a fair number of temptresses, sorceresses, and doe-eyed sirens. As with so many of Bara's films, Burne-Jones's painting is now apparently lost, although black and white reproductions exist. Bara biographer Eve Golden is among those to speculate the painting was itself influenced by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, first published the same year Burne-Jones painted *The Vampire*. The image does seem as if it could be an illustration of Jonathan Harker's terrifying yet unabashedly erotic encounter with the female vampires in *Dracula*'s castle; however, the connection is speculative at best.

<sup>13</sup> Although the word "vampire," signifying the predatory femme fatale type with which Bara became synonymous, was understood as having a meaning distinct from the supernatural "undead" vampire more familiar to later audiences, the former is obviously derived from the latter. The vampire associated with Central, Eastern, and Southern European folklore had been familiar to English-speaking audiences from at least as far back as the late eighteenth-century, during which time, according to Jean Marigny, the continental Romantic movement had begun to influence English poets including Coleridge and Keats, who incorporated vampire themes (almost always involving female vampires) into their works. While the word "vamp" continues to connote the Bara type wicked woman, "vampire" almost exclusively now connotes the horror movie staple. By the mid-1930s, the semantic shift in primary signification of the word was humorously acknowledged in the Universal feature *Dracula's Daughter* (Hillyer, 1936) when the hero, with wooden stake in hand, announces "I'm going out hunting vampires," to which his butler replies "I thought one did that with checkbooks."

<sup>14</sup> Contributing to the discrepancies and contradictions that were so much a part of Bara's promotion, readers were assured by some press reports that she remained "squarely between the realms of the unexplored mystic and the sternly practical commercialism of her calling. Swayed though she may be by her half belief in strange gods, she yet refuses their mastery" ("Is This"). Some of the publicity employed a kind of "we don't believe it, *but*..." tease about Bara's possibly supernatural traits. "We doubt that she actually takes her press-agent occultism too seriously," stated one such story, but continued, "Still, there is a vein of the mystic about her" (F. Smith). And as late as 1925, almost six years past Fox's control of

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her publicity, and even longer since any pretense towards exotic ethnicity had been dropped, it was still being reported, “This witch of the silver sheet has many seer-like qualities. She can set you laughing nervously with her accounts of your character as shown in the stars at your birth” (Shaffer).

<sup>15</sup> As an example of Bara’s supposed past lives being used for publicity, in 1915 she revealed that in one of her many previous incarnations she was “Ar Minz, the Spanish smuggler, who inspired Merimee’s ‘Carmen’” (Roberts)—not coincidentally just prior to Fox releasing its version of *Carmen*. Fox Film Corporation doubtlessly felt a need to exploit whatever angle it could in promoting Bara as *the* Carmen, considering that a rival production of the story from Jesse Lasky’s Feature Play Company, directed by Cecil B. DeMille and starring opera diva Geraldine Farrar in her film debut, would be in theaters at the same time.

<sup>16</sup> Those sources include Louella Parsons “Seen on the Screen” column for the *Chicago Record Herald*. In a review for the film *Sin* (1915), Parsons remarked that the reincarnation claims sounded like “a good press story... well calculated to go with Miss Bara’s dark, rather weird type of beauty,” also telling readers that Bara “actually believes” herself to be the reincarnation of Lucrezia Borgia “and some of those other famous fiends of history” (“Seen” [A]).

<sup>17</sup> The extreme sadism, gory brutality, and highly disturbing psychosexual content of the historical legend associated with Báthory makes it unlikely that a film version would have been seriously considered in the 1910s. If indeed the possibility of Bara playing Báthory were anything more than a fabrication for sensationalist publicity, however, then it would have been the first version by several decades of a now frequently adapted story. The Internet Movie Database lists thirty films in which Báthory is a named character, played by an array of cult celebrities including Ingrid Pitt, Delphine Seyrig, Paloma Picasso, and Andy Warhol “Superstar” Viva. Almost two-thirds of the films listed were made in the twenty-first century, including two lavish but poorly distributed costume dramas: *Bathory* (2008) a Czech production starring British actress Anna Friel; and *The Countess* (2009), written, directed by, and starring Julie Delpy. *Die Blutgräfin*, an Austrian production starring Tilda Swinton and listed on IMDB.com with a release date of 2011, has apparently been abandoned (“Elizabeth Bathory”).

<sup>18</sup> The “Death Valley” clip is “mysterious” in that it appears to be a horror spoof of the reality television program *Cops*, just like the MTV series of the same name—but was posted to YouTube four years before the television series aired. Because the clip is of obviously lower budget, and shot on video rather than on film, as is the MTV series, it’s possible this was an amateur video eventually used as a pitch for the television series.

<sup>19</sup> Two of the major publishers of such posters, Trilby Posters and Personality Posters, both marketed images of Bara in costume as Cleopatra in the 1960s and 70s.

<sup>20</sup> The blog appears as part of a website created to promote and generate discussion about the documentary short *The Line* (2009), in which the filmmaker, Nancy Schwartzman, confronts the man who raped her as part of a larger commentary on the prevalence of a “rape culture” in contemporary society (*Where Is Your Line?*).

<sup>21</sup> Galás, best known for the shattering intensity of her multi-octave, operatically trained voice and dramatic, rather frightening look, has never acknowledged a stylistic debt to Bara. However, her massive mane of black hair, flamboyant eye makeup, “exotic” ethnicity (Greek and Anatolian), and persona as an intimidating, even dangerous, woman, certainly taps into the recirculating vamp myth. Fans are not unaware of such associations: one visitor to Galás’s “tribute page” on Myspace has posted a photograph of Bara in *Cleopatra* costuming on the comment board (“Diamanda Galás”).

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<sup>22</sup> An Internet forum dedicated to women in goth music asks users “Who are your favorite gothic female personalities?” In addition to Siouxsie and Amy Lee, informants named such vampish-looking performers as Gitane Demone, formerly of Christian Death, Patricia Morrison, formerly of the Sisters of Mercy and the Damned, Vibeke Stene of Tristana, Eva O, Emilie Autumn, and Dana Dark of Psychonaut 75 (Lucifera666).

<sup>23</sup> All informants are identified either using a pseudonym or an online user name.

<sup>24</sup> A prominent example is the controversial SuicideGirls web “community,” which features self-posted suggestive and softcore pornographic photos of “pierced and inked” “Goth, Punk Rock and Emo Pin-up Girls” (“About SuicideGirls”). SuicideGirls also demonstrates the problematic aspects of equating alternative beauty with overt sexualization of the self, and the fetishization and display of the body. Despite SuicideGirls claiming to give their models a “real voice” and working to “feminize Internet pornography,” a number of participants have reported feeling exploited by the site (see Koht).

<sup>25</sup> Readers are told, in a caption under the “snake bra” *Cleopatra* image, “Exaggeration allows Theda to express her smoldering sensuality in a way that we can laugh at – and therefore embrace”—ascribing humorous intent where it was almost surely not intentional.

## Chapter Four

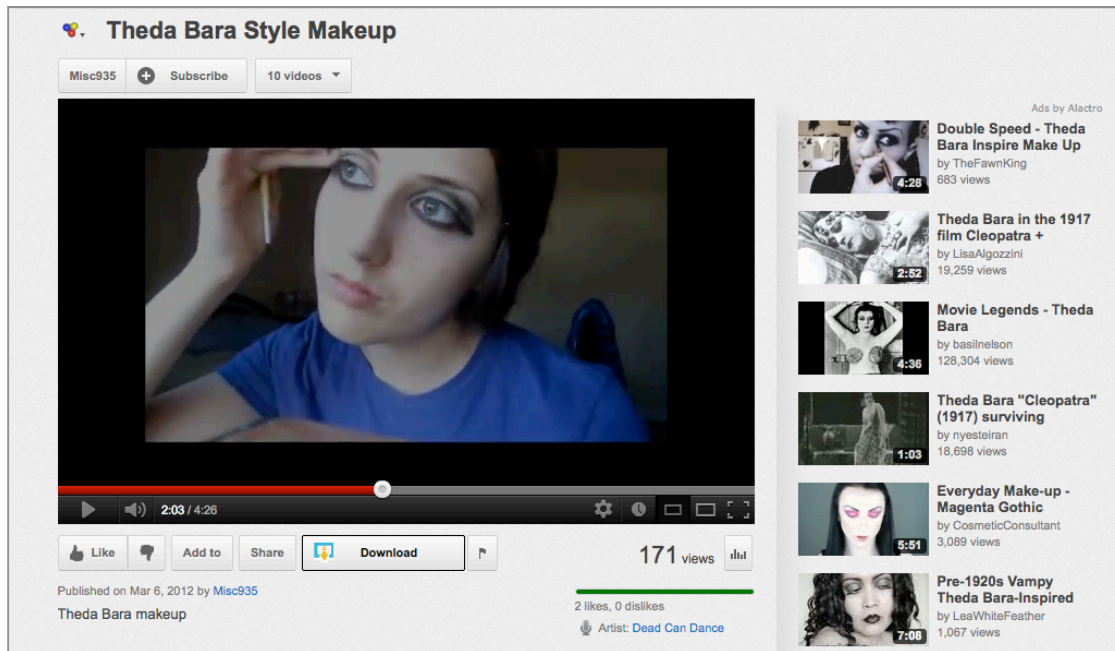
### The Black Widow on the Web: Theda Bara in the Digital Age

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*[E]veryone participates in the production of memory, though not equally. Some people actively construct memories, while others perform activities that are crucial to their transmission, retention, or contestation.*

— Barbie Zelizer<sup>1</sup>

As I have argued in this dissertation, the loss of so many of Bara's films has left a knowledge gap that requires a greater degree of participation in the meaning making process by individuals interested in her. Nowhere is the astonishing variety of knowledge production and repurposings of her image more apparent than online, and Bara's presence on the World Wide Web gives ample evidence of the wide array of uses audiences have found in stars' images. On YouTube, for instance, one can peruse a variety of user-produced video tributes to Bara, or follow tutorials on applying makeup for a Bara-inspired look (Figure 4.1). On Facebook, one can join a group called "My Life has been Touched by Theda Bara," which asks subscribers, "Do you love, seek, crave the tiny surviving fragments of the Life of this \*~\* Ethereal Powerful Effervescent\*~\* Woman, Actress, Star of the Silent Silver Screen?". Bara has her own Myspace profile, with photos, biography, filmography, and links to several other silent-era celebrity "friend" profiles (Figure 4.2), each of whom also has his or her own profile page. A user profile on Twitter informs visitors, "I write romantic gay erotica as Theda Black and horror, fantasy and erotica as Klaudia Bara" (Black). Titles of the many fan-created websites devoted to the star range from the staid "A Tribute to Theda Bara" (Stout) to the provocative "Fuck Yeah Theda Bara!".



**Figure 4.1**

Other online representations of Bara reveal a more pointedly ideological interpretation. Numbering Bara amongst “Jewesses with Attitude,” the website of the Jewish Women’s Archive proclaims, “We at the JWA tell the stories of women whose lives have been hidden by time and in doing that are happy to find stories about women, like Theda, whose legacies should not be forgotten” (Lauren). Elsewhere, Bara is invoked on conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart’s “Big Hollywood” site. In an article titled “Extra! Hebrew Hollywood Hottie Risks Life for U.S. Troops,” contributing author Robert J. Avrech celebrates Bara not only for her Judaism but also for her patriotic support of American soldiers during World War I (including visiting the wounded in hospitals during the influenza epidemic), her work ethic, scandal-free lifestyle, stable marriage to director Charles Brabin, and wise investments.

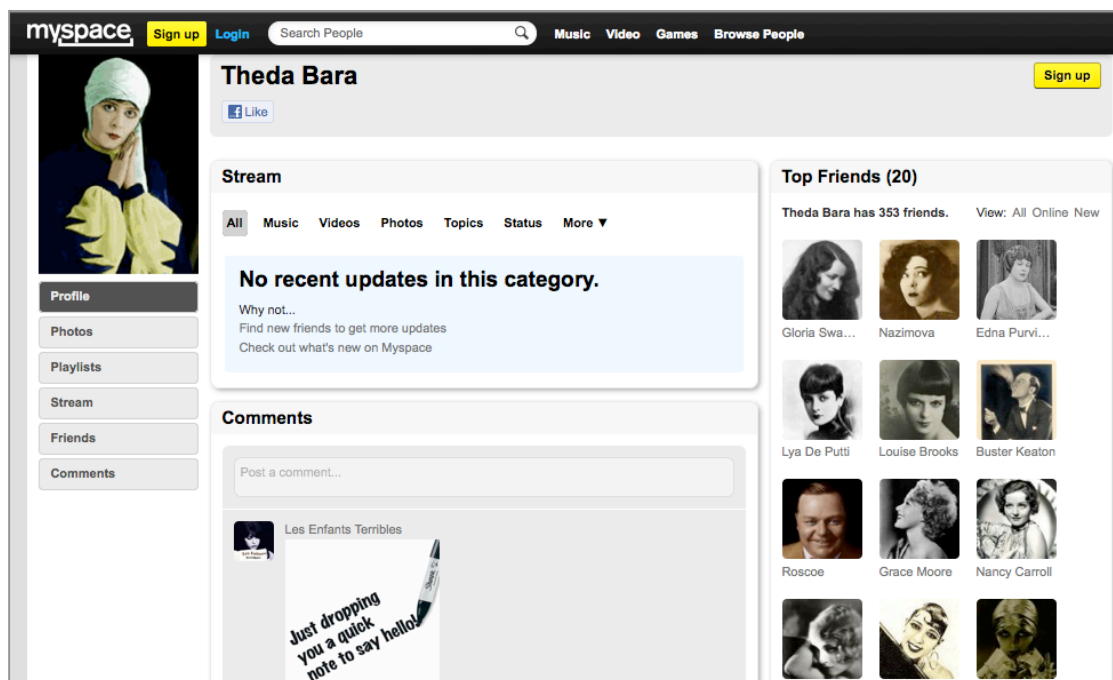


Figure 4.2

As even this small sample of online representations of Bara indicates, her repurposed image is expansive enough to be used for many different, even conflicting, intentions, with particular aspects highlighted or downplayed in order to fit the demands of differing purposes and ideologies. As argued throughout my dissertation, this openness to repurposing is probably the single most important condition that has made it possible for Bara's image to continue to circulate in cultural memory. The Internet merely makes more visible the same kind of lively, contentious discourse that has surrounded Bara from 1915 on—but the significance of that increased visibility and accessibility to multiple threads of discourse is monumental.

The Internet is now the primary way Bara is remembered, and has made her more available “on demand” and readable to audiences than at any other time, and by any other media platform, since national theatrical releases of her films in the 1910s and early 1920s. Because of both the sheer amount of information (including visual) about Bara online, and the many

different interpretations and uses of her image on display, the Internet further expands the polysemic and palimpsestic qualities of her stardom—as it does with virtually all aspects of popular culture. The broad, multifaceted, and contradictory array of representations of stars online, according to Paul McDonald, “can be seen to create both continuities and breaks with the history of the Hollywood star system” (*Star* 105). The tension between the “continuities and breaks” encountered when looking at stars online may disrupt the sense of “knowing about” a star, but can also shift the focus from seeking information to thinking about the ways stars can be made use of, and observing how others have tailored mass media for individuated purposes.

The overarching concern for this chapter is what these new media developments mean not just for the remembrance of Bara the movie star, but what they mean for audiences. Visibility through an online presence also means viability in culture, and representations of Bara online raise questions about the role stars play in the lives of audiences, how audiences extract personal use from star images, and how the cultural work in which they engage out of their interest in a particular star extends that star’s usefulness to others. In particular, I analyze how media users’ repurposing of films and stars of the past contributes to the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage, and in a manner that exerts considerable influence on the construction of cultural memory.

As Camille Bacon-Smith argues, “culture building can occur under cover of apparently innocent recreation” (qtd. Staiger *Media* 113), and I see these online remembrances of Bara, in their many forms, as exemplary of how media users, intentionally or not, produce works that function as a sort of time capsule. This corresponds to José van Dijck’s conception of *mediated memories*, the term she devised to describe the dynamic relationship between memory, objects, and “aspects of mind and body as well as of technology and culture” (1). Van Dijck defines



mediated memories as “the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” (20). In addition, she positions mediated memories in relation to existing theories of cultural memory, writing that such memories “mediate not only remembrance of things past; they also mediate relationships between individuals and groups of any kind” (1). Because mediated memories are an arena in which “the personal and the collective meet, interact, and clash,” they become sites from which “we may derive important cultural knowledge about the construction of historical and contemporaneous selves in the course of time” (2). I contend that mediated acts of repurposing are particularly informative sites of this kind of cultural knowledge and remembrance.

Van Dijck further emphasizes mediated memories’ role in the “*mutual shaping of memory and media*,” including how remembrance affects “the way we deploy media” (2). This is a significant consideration in determining why Bara has retained a presence in cultural memory, and in conjunction with my thoughts on *revisionist* memory, or the ways affect can change how things are remembered, helps explain why Bara’s image has been adaptable to so many different forms of repurposing in so many different contexts. With this in mind, I also find van Dijck’s term useful because of the different connotations of the word “mediated.” The term can refer to the process of embodying memory as a media artifact, but I also interpret it as indicating the action of an intercessor or mediator between “actual” memory (if there is such a thing) and memory influenced by a host of factors other than direct experience. Mediated memories are thus understood as already shaped by outside forces, including other media and other mediated memories; they also exert influence on acts of remembrance, individual and cultural, by those who encounter them.

In this chapter, I explore how the mediation of memory is reflected by actual online practices by investigating recent iterations of Bara's image in digital media, and talking to the creators of these representations about their motivation to produce mediated remembrances of Bara. The video tributes, speculative recreations, documentaries, websites, and consumer goods I examine appear to communicate a personal investment in both preserving the memory of and communicating one's attachment to some aspect of Bara's star image. As such, they can tell us much about the individual and cultural meanings of consumer-producer activities, and the impact that mediated memories can have on the recording of history.

Importantly, these individually crafted and highly specific remembrances capture, preserve, and perpetuate not only a particular "vision" of a particular star, but also the cultural, social, and historical context of that star's reception at a certain time and place.

Rather than dismiss digital artifacts such as makeup tutorials or fake profiles on social networking sites as frivolous, they should be considered for the insight they provide into the diversity of readings and uses of star image. In this chapter I contend that media consumers, in their capacity as producers of culture, have long served as amateur archivists, preservationists, and curators of cultural heritage, including film history. If, as I argued in my introduction, we regard film not just as the physical artifact onto which moving pictures are recorded (film, tape, disc, etc.), but also as the totality of its surround and a multiplicity of concerns, then film archiving and preservation have been in the hands of audiences since cinema's beginning, in the form of making fan-produced art and literature, participating in fan clubs, emulating stars in fashion and persona, collecting fan magazines, publicity photos, posters, lobby cards, tickets, and other "ephemera" (or even films themselves), scrapbooking, bootlegging, gossiping, and simply remembering. In this way, media audiences have maintained repositories of knowledge and

memories, at least in part connected to physical objects, which often went unrecognized as significant by official arbiters of popular cultural heritage.

### **Objectified Memory and the Persistence of Ephemera**

While these alternative forms of archiving and preserving film history have existed for over a century, the efforts of media consumers-as-producers have been facilitated and made exponentially more accessible to others by new media. Observing that the Internet has provided media consumers with a greater capacity for “an interactive construction of star discourse” than any other form of mass communication, McDonald speculates that online culture has changed the star system through “decentering the production of star discourses.” In other words, film studios now have far less control over the kind or amount of information that is circulated, or the venues in which it circulates. Although McDonald says that in some ways this “dispersal of authorship in star discourse” raises concern about the meanings and uses audiences will find in star images, he also claims that individualized intervention into star discourse has gone “a long way towards continuing and further promoting the appeal of film stars” (*Star* 106).

McDonald’s contention, however, that individuals create “virtual shrines of star adoration” (*Star* 106) is a gratuitous oversimplification of online audience practice. As the case studies in this chapter indicate, media consumers’ reasons for producing and disseminating digital artifacts go far beyond merely “adoring” stars. When George Lipsitz observes that “historical memories and historical evidence” have ceased to be the sole domain of archives, museums, and libraries, but “pervade popular culture and public discourse as well” (*Time* 36), he indicates that the role of cultural stewardship is no longer an exclusively institutional domain. Similarly, Pierre Lévy argues that online practices can perform an important archival function,

and that through “processes of transmission, invention, or forgetfulness, heritage becomes an element of individual responsibility” (17).

New media, as scholars such as Lévy, Lev Manovich, and Henry Jenkins have argued, have made people more alert to their ability to affect the flow and intelligibility of information. Lipsitz sees the rise of such communication technologies, “rather than signaling the death knell for historical inquiry,” as amplifying the socio-political import of collective memory, heightening its function as “a crucial constituent of individual and group identity in the modern world” (*Time* vii-viii). New media have also raised awareness that acts of cultural production are almost inevitably tied to acts of consumption, a circumstance described by John Hartley’s term *redaction*, “the creative editorial function of bringing existing materials together to make new texts and meanings” (*Television* 198). The forms of amateur archiving, preservation, and curating I explore in this chapter are redactive acts, a reworking and recombination of artifacts that facilitate new sets of meaning, and therefore also correspond to acts of repurposing, in finding new uses for preexisting materials. They also represent acts of revisionist remembering—not so much in recovering hidden information or giving voice to marginalized peoples of the past, but in making affect a component of the remembrance and re-presentation of Bara’s star image.

That image, as previously noted, is in many ways more dependent on intertextuality than other stars’ images due to the loss of Bara’s filmic record. Thus, it is conceivably also more apt to support recombinant permutations of signification. In light of the fact that Bara’s films (ostensibly the primary text by which a film star’s image is conveyed) were lost while under the ownership of the media industry, fans and amateurs have been of particular importance in keeping remembrance of Bara “alive.” By collecting and preserving the so-called ephemera that

have outlived the films they were meant to supplement, amateurs have retained not only the intangible personal memories that contribute to cultural memory, but also the physical artifacts that objectify aspects of those memories, and have provided the materials through which Bara's image has been repurposed over decades.

Compared to film, which is notoriously difficult, costly, even dangerous to archive, ephemera are relatively easy to store and maintain once obtained. Often imbued with sentimental or nostalgic affect for collectors, items like posters, lobby cards, exhibitors' press packets and exploitation guides, publicity photos, and fan magazines communicate a great deal about a film and its socio-historical context (Figures 4.3; 4.4). Not only because these items were often originally considered disposable and of little value by the mass media industries that produced them, but also because they have become the objects of cathexis, amateur collectors are likely in large part the reason much of these ephemeral artifacts still survive.<sup>2</sup> In his study of collecting practices, Russell W. Belk appears ambivalent towards the justification some individuals' voiced that their collecting was a cultural contribution, and that the collected objects were "the benefactors of heroic



**Figures 4.3 and 4.4:** While original posters are prohibitively expensive for the casual collector, easily available, readily downloadable images online extend the remembrance of many of Bara's lost films.

efforts by collectors with the foresight, diligence, and cleverness to rescue objects from certain danger or oblivion” (81). Regardless of psychological or consumerist concerns about collecting, however, it is undeniable that private collectors have done much to benefit the cultural memory and contribute to the collective intelligence regarding film history.

Despite the fact that they are often more accessible than the films they append, the effect of ephemera on reception is little studied. On the one hand, because ephemera are not as connected with a specific narrative as films, or may evoke more open-ended narratives generated by stars’ images and promotion, they may also be more fluid in their potential meanings and more accommodating of individualized uses. New media and online culture have also expanded the opportunities for virtual collecting: the gathering, downloading, filing, and storing of information, images, audio and video clips, and other digital artifacts. My informants’ productions, ranging from amateur-produced websites and video tributes or “portraits” compiling still images of Bara into slideshow presentations with musical soundtracks, to professional documentaries and lost film reconstructions, demonstrate how collecting ephemera, both physical and virtual, can develop into the curating and display of recontextualized artifacts to others.

On the other hand, ephemera as collectors’ items may become little more than commodity fetishes, valued for rarity or resale value rather than the information they can provide. The fetishization of the object may extend to films and stars themselves, similarly impairing their ability to communicate at a deeper level. The act of collecting, Barbara Klinger argues, grants the collector a sense of authorship, as “producer of an intelligible, meaningful, private cosmos” which, however, often “occludes the relations the collection has to the outside world, particularly to the social and material conditions of mass production” (*Beyond* 89). While

she is referring specifically to home video collecting, much of what she argues is readily applicable to ephemera, many types of which (posters, lobby cards, publicity photos, on-set shots, and costume and set designs) are in turn standard paratexts as extra features on DVDs and Blu-ray discs.

While de-contextualization of the collected object may be one possible outcome of the collector's sense of authorship, it could also (or simultaneously) become a form of making meaning out of one's various interactions with media through the connections and combinations one makes, whether the collections are physical or virtual. Van Dijck makes the case that personal collections of memory objects are significant in that they "can be considered markers of cultural agency." She argues that the "creative rerecordings and recollections" collectors may perform with their cache of objects are among the ways "that cultural heritage becomes established" (25). The sense of authorship one might gain through such practices can also be directed outwards, towards more public forms of cultural production, such as contribution to cultural memory through online acts of curating images and information.

### **Archiving, Preserving, and Curating in Mediated Remembrance**

Before exploring my case studies, I want to provide a brief overview of how I'm applying the concepts of archiving, preserving, and curating to the online practices of media users. In terms of the cultural work amateurs might accomplish through new media, these acts are considerably altered from their professional and "old media" equivalents. Various technologies, such as home computing, digital photography, scanners, user-friendly website and blog templates, online discussion boards, and photo, video, and music sharing sites have enabled fans to mediate and distribute their collections. This is a matter of major consequence, for as film archivist and

curator Jan-Christopher Horak points out, “Mass distribution of film history to the general public and dedicated buffs will of necessity occur in the digital realm” (“Gap” 34). Although Horak is referring to the digitalization of individual films, I contend that film history is also communicated by online archives of intertextual materials and access to virtual repositories of information and opinions, both those of audiences and of cultural institutions like libraries and museums. Just as the acquisition and storage of ephemera by fans and collectors have preserved essential materials for film history and cultural heritage, the work of amateurs also constitutes a preservative act in the form of mediated memories. Further, this practice enables the cultivation of *collective intelligence*, described by Lévy as the always in process shared bank of information growing out of participatory collaboration and circulating amongst members of a “knowledge community.”

Archiving and preserving, as the terms are conventionally understood, are most applicable at the amateur level to the private collecting of objects by individuals (rather than institutions). While in some cases amateur collectors may document, research, appraise, repair, write about, or provide access to the artifacts in their possession, for the most part archiving and preservation by amateurs is primarily a matter of acquiring and storage, typically without the resources for conservation and restoration of cultural institutions. With digital rather than physical artifacts, though, archiving may be a matter of saving files onto hard drives and discs, stored for later access. Importantly, this also means that artifacts are converted into a format that is easily disseminated and reproduced—if the collector is inclined to share his or her materials. Preservation in this case may be a matter not of maintaining the integrity of a rare or unique object, but of sharing and distributing virtual objects so that they exist in many locations.



In both digital archiving and preservation, the reproducibility of the virtual artifact extends its presence, in theory meaning that it is more likely to be stored in multiple places (although I acknowledge the debate over the “authority” or value of the digital artifact versus the physical or “real” object, assessing this matter would divert me from my primary concerns).<sup>3</sup> Multiple sites of storage *and* access are vital, because the mediated memories of amateurs are even more ephemeral in nature than physical ephemera or film—here today and potentially the dead URL of tomorrow. Digitized artifacts in theory are accessible to an indefinite number of Internet users, meaning that mediated remembrances have the capacity to “extend the growth of knowledge far beyond what can be achieved by professionals publishing in print” (Hartley, “Uses” 132). We must be realistic in understanding the limitations of the digital, however—not only its ephemerality and instability, but also because the finding, capturing, archiving, and preserving of digital artifacts by amateurs is often a matter of chance due to the unpredictability of the Internet as a resource. Just as films or other artifacts are sometimes thought to become “lost” within the holdings of archives and museums, digitized materials may also become buried in the incomprehensibly vast data flow online. With both physical and virtual artifacts, and with both institutional and decentralized storage, there is the question of whether that which becomes lost can ever be refound.

Because of this, amongst other reasons, it becomes dangerous to put too much faith in the digital at the expense of the analog.<sup>4</sup> Although the online efforts of amateurs may not represent long-term solutions to the problems of film loss and data preservation, they are vital placeholders for keeping the very artifacts needing attention and professional preservation in circulation and in cultural memory. Digitization, in this respect, needs to be viewed as a separate issue than the preservation of the *object*, and regarded in its capacity to preserve the *memory of the object*—

valuable cultural work that amateurs are better able to undertake than the complex caretaking demands of object preservation. Mediated memories, by preventing “vulnerable” films, stars, directors, and other cinema-related information from slipping through the cultural cracks into both metaphorical and physical oblivion, foster important preconditions for their (professional) conservation and preservation.

Although amateur archiving and preservation via new media can be problematic, new media are more effective as a means for media consumers to take on the role of curator—that is, of preparing materials for public presentation. While new media endows “everyday folks” with a greater capacity to develop and share archives of their own, these are a new kind of archive. Conventional archives have preserved historical and cultural heritage in large part by collecting, storing, and then permitting only limited access to artifacts to a select few scholars and experts, and then under supervision and control. Where amateur archiving and curating of digital materials succeed over professional archiving of physical objects is precisely in matters of access. The World Wide Web as an archive offers contact, albeit virtual, with objects both common and rarified, to all who have Internet access.

With this degree of access, cultural artifacts are not held in stasis, and in fact are preserved in a way that is available to the point of appropriation, quite unlike the conventional physical archive. Fan-made videos, websites, blogs, podcasts, and other online forums replicate some of the functions of the museum exhibition, in which someone with a degree of expertise on a subject communicates his or her vision of that particular thing, thereby shaping knowledge about that subject, and explaining its relevance to the culture at large.<sup>5</sup> In looking at the history of the modern museum, Tony Bennett explores how it became a tool of “social management,” regulating visitors’ conduct, performance, even their relation to physical space, and doing so in a

way that engenders a “self-perpetuating” regulation of behavior (6). While virtual exhibitions may not appear to exert these same kinds, or degree, of control as brick-and-mortar institutions, they do replicate museums’ regulation of *thought* by controlling representations and exhibiting artifacts “in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values” (6). Inevitably, both professional and amateur curators, regardless of whether in institutional settings with physical objects or in cyberspace with virtual artifacts, select certain data and not others to put on display, regulating information. Further, the manner in which that data is presented shapes interpretation; as Bennett indicates, the question of how museums “show what they show” is “a critical one, sometimes bearing more consequentially on the visitor’s experience than the actual objects displayed” (126).

Regulating interpretation also means regulating use and remembrance of data, images, or artifacts. The Internet is not an “anything goes” font of unlimited meanings; it exerts multiple controls and limits on users’ access to, interpretation, and use of data. It is, however, far less regulated than conventional museums and archives, and its political effects much harder to gauge or anticipate. Van Dijck rejects the thought that “memory products” are “purely constraining or conformist.” Mediated memories “enable structured expression,” but she argues that they “also invite subversion or parody, alternative or unconventional enunciations.” Products of memory, she continues, “are first and foremost creative products, the provisional outcomes of confrontations between individual lives and culture at large” (7).

The “provisional outcomes” of mediated memories, I would add, are an outgrowth of accessibility, and notably obtaining access to cultural products in domestic or familiar spaces rather than unfamiliar, perhaps intimidating, museums or archives. In a manner quite different from institutional settings, the amateur-created online exhibit is a mode of desacralizing rather

than apotheosizing the rarefied object. This corresponds to Walter Benjamin's well-known claim in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that greater accessibility to a work of art through reproduction technologies depletes the "aura" of uniqueness and exclusiveness of the original, and that this has the potential to make art part of everyday life rather than the privilege of an elite. It also means that the *idea* of art and creation, not just a specific work, becomes available to a wider, more diverse group.

The same holds true with the online remediation of cinematic heritage, mitigating the strangeness and unfamiliarity of old media (and in a sense, the past in general) by making it more accessible. It also means that the altering, recreating, and recontextualizing of older media typical of online remediation demonstrates the ability to *interact* with the past, to imbue it with new meanings while still retaining a sense of its original range of meanings. For example, reappropriation of Bara as a feminist figure is made the more incisive by "reading against the grain" the antiquated anti-feminist messages "encoded" in her image, or upholding Bara as a figure of Jewish pride gains an edge from reading irony into the potentially anti-Semitic equation of exoticism with immorality. As this suggests, these new archives promote the rearticulation of older media through redaction and repurposing in a way that expands the use value of an artifact, and enhances its memorability and cultural vibrancy.

### **Redaction in Action: Amateur Preservation of Cultural Heritage**

As noted previously, there has been a tendency to dismiss or ignore Bara in academic film history, and it is therefore not surprising that her online presence is generated in large part by media consumers acting as producers of culture. The use of the word "fan" to describe the creators of these mediated remembrances, though, is not quite apt. Although all the people I spoke with told of being intrigued by Bara's image, for some the impulse behind their creative

works had less to do with Bara specifically than with the desire to call attention to stars of the past in general, or lost films, or costume design, or even to make and sell handmade goods. Rendering these impulses as material objects or digital texts takes many forms, and my exploration includes professional documentaries and still reconstructions as well as amateur video collages, websites, filmographies, and consumer goods such as jewelry and paper dolls. In addition to the work involved in actually producing an artifact, all of these projects involve considerable time and energy devoted to research, interpretation, and knowledge production. As such, these cases take us beyond the well-worn discussion of the collapse of distinction between media consumers and producers, to consideration of the middle ground between professional and amateur.

To gain insight into the overlap between professional and amateur efforts in film historianship and memory preservation, I include interviewees of both types. Two of my informants, Phillip Dye and Hugh Munro Neely, work professionally in the media industry, both having written, produced, and directed several documentaries on film history and silent-era film stars. I categorize my other informants as volunteer amateurs. Use of the term “amateur” is not meant to connote lack of competency, knowledge, or skill, but rather to emphasize that these individuals participate in acts of preserving and curating out of their tastes, interests, and affective attachments to certain cultural artifacts. “Volunteer” amplifies this, signaling work done for personal reasons, or even a sense of obligation, rather than monetary gain. Volunteer amateurs interviewed include producers of short video tributes to Bara posted on YouTube: Basil, a sixty-four-year old retiree in the United Kingdom; Rachel, twenty-six, a nursing student in Tennessee; Harriet, a twenty-year old film studies student in London; Regina, age twenty, who declined revealing her location; and flappergirl, a nineteen-year old student in France. I also

interviewed two creators of websites focusing in part or whole on Bara: Hala Pickford, a twenty-two-year old in California; and Jonathan, a twenty-four-year old social worker in Pennsylvania. Additionally, I spoke to two artisans marketing hand-made goods incorporating Bara's image online: David, sixty-five, a high school teacher in Illinois; and Astrid, a twenty-four-year old MBA student from Georgia.<sup>6</sup>

For the sake of organization, I pair particular sets of case studies with different concepts and concerns. This is for structure only—in all of the case studies, the same issues tend to interconnect and overlap in the production of meaning and memory, but some issues more obviously predominate in certain cases. My analysis of amateur-made video tributes to Bara, for instance, is used as a way of exploring such matters as “old” media being preserved/remembered through new media, and the influence these productions may have on cultural memory. Online discussion boards serve as a way of addressing the production of collective intelligence, and fan-made websites are the means of looking at navigation of the mediascape and the cultivation of media literacy. Conversations with vendors who make and sell handmade goods online become a forum for looking into what Jean Burgess and Joshua Green have called “creative consumption” (14)—acts of consumption that correspond to acts of personal expression. Finally, my interviews with the two professional filmmakers provide insight on the use value of ephemera and issues of access to artifacts and information.

### **Remediating the Vamp: Video Tributes as Mediated Remembrance**

The World Wide Web is not only the primary forum by which mediated memories are displayed; it also makes readily available the raw materials for further acts of redaction and repurposing. In this sense, Internet interactivity allows people to construct and experience texts that function not only as cultural mnemonic devices, but also as “hands-on” museums that permit virtual

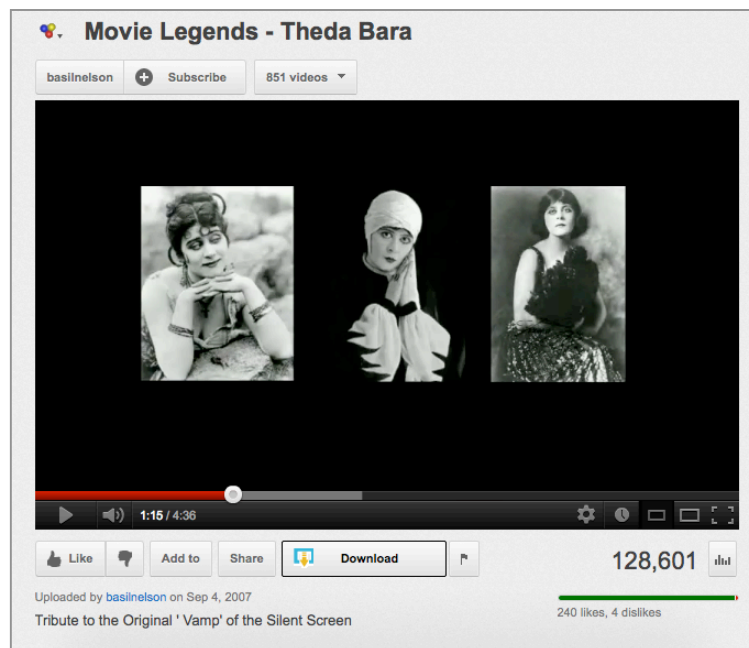
browsing, collecting, reassembling, and interconnecting of texts, objects, and memories. Activity of this kind is exemplified by the amateur video tributes posted to YouTube, which compile visual and informational data into idiosyncratic new combinations. Burgess and Green emphasize YouTube's potential as a "platform for peer learning and knowledge sharing about all kinds of things" (73) because, as they argue, it serves as "a coordinating mechanism between individual and collective creativity and meaning production" (37). By presenting information, primarily visual, in a simple yet appealing format, amateur video tributes set the stage for the kind of meaning production that contributes to Bara's retention in cultural memory.

The tributes discussed here are all in the form of montages of still photos, posted onto video-sharing sites such as YouTube. They are typically created with readily available, easy to use editing software such as Windows Movie Maker, using images of Bara, either gleaned from web sources such as FanPix.net, Silent-Movies.org, and Google image searches, or scanned from analog sources, and edited together in a slideshow format. The creators make their videos distinctive through their choices of photos and the sequencing, editing (with various fades, dissolves, wipes, or irises), and techniques that they use to emulate camera movements in motion pictures (panning, tilting, zooming in, dollying back). According to my informants, though, many producers of these videos feel that their selection of musical accompaniment to the images is what really makes the tributes "their own" (discussed below).

Although Burgess and Green describe YouTube as an "accidental and disorganized...bottom-up cultural archive" (89), the actions of many contributors, including my informants, make clear that they don't see the archival possibilities of the site or their work as "accidental." Of my informants, Basil in particular exemplifies my argument that volunteer amateurs can serve as important archivists, preservationists, and curators. He has posted more

than 300 “video portraits” of a variety of film stars in a “Movie Legends” series onto YouTube, and told me that his YouTube channel is visited by fans and film scholars alike, one of whom described his work as of “cultural significance.” “I release three or four videos per week but it can take several months to gather enough images for each video,” Basil said. He also mentioned that he has as many as thirty separate projects “on the bench” at a time (e-mail interview). He makes his selections for which stars to feature by consulting books on Hollywood to determine which were the most important. His research into better-known stars leads him to lesser-remembered actors, and he takes particular pride in preserving the remembrance of now obscure stars such as Clara Kimball Young and Alice White, major names of their era. As of August 2012, Basil’s Theda Bara video portrait, consisting of forty publicity images of the star, had received nearly 130,000 views (Figure 4.5).

Work such as this represents how amateurs knowingly take on the role of cultural stewards by disseminating information about things that they find meaningful. Basil’s video



**Figure 4.5**

portrait projects are motivated by his desire for old film stars to be remembered; others, while sharing the same concern, expressed their motivation in terms that addressed their affective response to Bara. Regina described the loss of Bara’s films as “tragic,” and said she was fascinated by “so much mystery surrounding” the star, adding, “it’s



really strange that someone that once was such a huge star now is unknown to most people” (e-mail interview). Similarly, Pickford, whose *Forget the Talkies!* website is devoted to silent film fandom and commentary, said she was intrigued by the “enigma” of Bara’s lingering remembrance even though her films were lost, and that the loss of Bara’s films “in and of itself might be a reason” for her interest (e-mail interview).

While not attempting to be stand-ins for the many lost Bara films, these tribute videos nonetheless preserve Bara’s identity as a movie star. Because these montages of images and information about her are no longer tied to the specific narratives of the films, it’s also likely that these videos are less constrained by a set of anticipated interpretations. Graham Allen’s definition of intertextuality is especially relevant here, in which he says “intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader’s own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic ‘voices’ which exist within society” (209). Tribute videos demonstrate how engagement with the intertext lends itself to repurposing as a creative act, which in turn becomes another component of the intertext that conveys information and ideas about Bara.

Even so, it is important to consider that the kind of Internet-sourced knowledge found in mediated memories typically decontextualizes that data to an enormous degree.

Decontextualization on the one hand separates knowledge from the social, political, cultural, and economic concerns that determine that knowledge’s real world significance.

Harriet’s video portrait, for example, is a combined tribute to both Bara and Louise Brooks, with photos of both stars interspersed throughout, in no apparent order. Both are silent film stars, and both are remembered as sexualized femme fatale types; with little other film historical connection, though, a combined tribute comprised of decontextualized images can give the

impression of the silent era as one undifferentiated period, confuse one star with the another, and tell us little about the distinct qualities of each and their respective historical-cultural context.

On the other hand, *recontextualization* of knowledge by individuals has the potential to reinvest information with social, political, cultural, and economic importance for *new* circumstances. Harriet's tribute is not *intended* to be a work of film history, but rather speak to her own interests, impressions of each star, and affective attachments. Bara and Brooks's images are recontextualized in a way that links them with subcultural tastes and concerns: as the descriptive caption for her video explains, "I really love their style, very gothic" (Thymian13), and the tribute is capped off with a song by The Cure, a band with goth associations. Fan-created web pages and tributes, discussion forums, and reviews and commentary posted on "dot com" sites reveal that some media consumers are also keenly aware of their place in a chain of meaning, and the active part their acts of recontextualization take in the production and dissemination of certain sets of information. For instance, one commentator moved to "review" the Bara version of *Cleopatra* (Edwards, 1917) on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) bestows "Praise upon a film in memory only" and observes, "We can only remember it in stills and the written word" (Morris) with the commentary and factual information he provides serving as contributions to the remembrance of a lost film. Over 180 additional IMDB users have provided a rating for the unseeable film, giving it an average score of 5.9 out of 10.

As this suggests, the most obvious outcome of amateur cultural work is that individuals at the grassroots level, through collecting, writing, sharing, and participating in the development of collective intelligence, potentially have a great deal of influence on how cultural memory—and by extension history—is constructed and communicated. Just as "official" archiving, preserving, and curating are highly fraught political acts, so they are at the amateur level, too. Theoretically,

this could represent a significant mode of empowerment for Internet participants, a “bottom-up” collaboration on a “people’s history” of themselves through contribution to the construction of cultural memory, preservation of the past, documentation of the present, and expansion of who is permitted to serve as cultural gatekeepers. In practice, the situation is more complicated.

The archiving, preserving, and curating of popular culture by volunteer amateurs undoubtedly expands the range of voices audible from both the past and in the present, but it is easy to overplay the utopian ideals of what is possible through new media and participatory culture. Matters such as the digital divide and what has been labeled the participation gap still mean that intervention into history and memory is not available to all, and “democratic” participatory culture may simply end up repeating the same cultural myopia and exclusions of the past. Those on the “right side” of the participation gap, according to Jenkins, will be able to expand their privilege in creating their own cultural materials and connecting with others who do likewise, while those on the wrong side will, according to Bill Ivey and Steven J. Tepper, “increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates” (qtd. Jenkins *Convergence* 125).

Because of this, the remembrance of Bara and other aspects of media history may be increasingly connected to a cultural elite; if she was of significance to an underclass—women, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities—during her career, then there is the danger that much of the potential cultural use of her image could be usurped for less egalitarian ends—or simply disappear. Undoubtedly, political or ideological agendas spur some of the participation in the web’s knowledge bank, and Bara’s image, as noted earlier, is expansive enough to support very different socio-political positions. Acts of archiving, preserving, and curating, whether individual or collaborative, institutional or amateur, affect not only what gets remembered and by whom,

but also form a very specific context that influences the range of “likely” interpretations in how others will read, respond to, and make sense of the data they encounter. Awareness of this may be one of the motivating factors behind volunteer cultural stewardship. Such awareness is an outgrowth of the cultivation of media literacy, or “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Russo and Watkins 151), in a broad demographic of media consumers.

While their online contributions indicate a high degree of media literacy, most of my informants do not regard their work as having an explicit political “agenda.” As noted, however, participation in constructing cultural memory is inevitably political, and even the most seemingly trivial or insignificant gestures may have unanticipated effects. Most of my informants *did* indicate an awareness that their mediated remembrances contributed to cultural memory, recognizing that their efforts make other Internet users more aware of silent-era film. Resiliently contrary to speculations that digital media would somehow supplant analog, the older media incorporated into new media in fact appear to be revived by acts of convergence, remediation, and repurposing. Barbara Klinger sees media users engaging in acts of remediation as a way of reinforcing awareness that media “constantly comment upon, embody, or otherwise refashion one another” (*Beyond* 235). Angelina Russo and Jerry Watkins describe this sort of recurrence of old media in the new as extending “the ongoing process of the reform and refashioning of information” (154), a process that aptly describes tribute videos and other acts of mediated remembrance—and indicates the potential for these texts to have cultural effects exceeding the mnemonic.

Just as redaction and repurposing existed as audience activities long before the advent of new media, remediation has a long history. New media, however, may make the lineage of a

text's various prior media incarnations clearer, by collecting and holding massive amounts of data that are often connected by hyperlinks and less literal chains of association. As Klinger observes, the makers of film parodies posted online don't regard new media as "revolutionary," but as something that lays bare the "'genealogy of affiliations' in which media interact in a vital, reciprocal manner through their histories" (*Beyond* 235). Likewise, although they regard YouTube as a "site of cultural and economic disruption," Burgess and Green caution against hailing it as revolutionary, seeing it instead as a barometer of "increased turbulence," making visible "various established practices, influences, and ideas" in competition with new ones (14).

Many of my informants described their interaction with the media in a way that corresponds with these aspects of convergence culture and remediation. Basil, for instance, said that his uploading of videos onto YouTube "is a testimony to the way that entertainment is changing," positioning the Internet within a chain of technological innovations, from silent cinema to "talkies" to television to the World Wide Web. Significantly, he didn't speak of these innovations rendering earlier technologies obsolete or irrelevant, but rather making them more accessible to a wider audience: "There are very few places where silent films can be seen by the wider public and Youtube (sic) and other social networking sites provide this need," he said. "Silent film is far from dead and it is the Internet that is the key to keeping it alive."

Others agreed that the Internet was integral to the remembrance of silent-era films and their stars. A number of informants in their twenties cited the Internet as the forum in which they first discovered Bara, and all spoke of their interest being heightened by the images of and information about her found online. On her website, Pickford writes of her excitement that revived interest in silent film was in evidence on the Internet: "even if it seems random and obscure SOMEONE out there does care...and usually very passionately at that" ("The FIRST"),

adding “Theda is an example of why this is vital. She was important for her time and people are curious about why and how” (“The Problem”).

If the political aspects of memory work were not at the forefront of my informants’ intentions, then the affective rewards are, and most spoke of the personal fulfillment they find in creating their works and taking part in a knowledge community. As their responses also illuminate, though, the affective in this context can become inseparable from the political. Basil, for example, described “the whole ethos” of his video production as nostalgia, which he described as “a feeling that probably eludes most young people today.” Nostalgia, particularly in the work of Frederic Jameson, is regarded as symptomatic of the emptiness of the postmodern condition. Postmodern culture, in this view, is “incapable of producing serious images, or texts which give people meaning and direction,” instead filling in this void with “cultural bric-à-brac and with old images recycled and reintroduced into circulation as pastiche” (McRobbie 147). As Angela McRobbie points out, though, the kinds of recycled imagery often seen in “DIY” contexts are *not* nostalgic, and do not seek to “recreate the past faithfully, and to wallow in” the mythology of the past as a better time. Instead, what typically characterizes these recombinations of fragments of the past are “a knowingness, a wilful (sic) anarchy and an irrepressible optimism” (148).

Remediation, convergence culture, and repurposing can be the modes for activating media of the past in such a way that interest in older popular culture has far less to do with nostalgia than with the new forms of interplay between past and present audiences can discover and create. For many of my informants, generating interest amongst younger Internet users in Bara, silent films, and other silent stars has motivated their work. For example, Astrid said that she would “like to think that I am helping to maintain an interest in her, particularly with the

younger generation who may not have been exposed to silent icons as I was,” and said that she hopes “that people will view my items and their interest will be piqued, if they previously did not know who (Bara) was” (e-mail interview).

Pickford, calling her wish to “interest a new generation in silent film” the “biggest goal” of her website, said “There’s a few silent film fans who write or take part in the community/forums and are 17-25... but not many.” She also spoke of what she saw as not only a generational but a gender divide in silent film fandom, saying she’s felt excluded by the middle-aged men who comprise the established silent film *cognoscenti* at film festivals and adding, “Thankfully as they pass on so will this attitude.” Pickford reported that she has experienced both disbelief as well as some flack when visitors find out that a young woman authored the website.

For others, the motivation to contribute to the remembrance of old films and stars was expressed more in terms of frustration that aspects of culture and history they find important are being ignored. Regina voiced a common concern that efforts like hers are needed to retain awareness of films of the past: “I often get the feeling that the silent era isn’t taken very seriously these days, and (is) not discussed at all, even among film fans. I know there are many people today that don’t care about the silent films, and dismiss films just because they are old, and that’s really sad.” Likewise, Jonathan saw his interests as setting him apart from many media users of his generation: “To me, a true film fan is aware of, and appreciates, the great films, directors, stars, and actors of all the decades. Certainly there are too many who appreciate only what is new, or created after they were born” (e-mail interview).

As this indicates, the creators of videos, websites, and other mediated memories are often aware—and hopeful—that the materials they produce and upload to the Internet affect

remembrance by making cyber-encounters with Bara more possible. When I asked my informants whether they felt their projects would influence if and how Bara is remembered, however, the reactions were somewhat mixed. “I can only hope my montage slideshows do help to continue the memory,” Basil responded, and Pickford answered, “Maybe someday I’ll make some impact I don’t yet fully understand,” saying that the information she posts online “might not outlast me or my own legacy,” but that she hopes “the effort will.” Regina said that she didn’t feel her video tribute would have much impact on *how* others remember Bara, but perhaps might affect *if* she’s remembered: “I think (the video) at least makes more people aware of Theda Bara, since so many people visit YouTube it is a good way to show images of her that people can see and appreciate all over the world.”

In addition to passing on images and information through their creations, some of my informants also told of their hope that their online postings may provide a model for others to produce works of their own. “I think my slideshow may contribute (to Bara’s remembrance) by getting people interested in Theda if they enjoy seeing her photos,” Rachel said. She speculated that it may “perhaps inspire them to do some type of memorial or tribute to Theda themselves,” thereby “exposing more people to Theda.” Pickford said that the positive response she’s received for her website has led her to encourage others who are “trying to do some good work” in amateur film historianship, something she says is “apparently is a change from the old guard attitude.”

As these responses indicate, amateurs are aware of the potential reach their work may have, and its place in a chain of meaning. YouTube, according to Burgess and Green, exemplifies these “increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value, and agency” (14). In his rather utopian vision of how cyberspace can



function as a site of interactive knowledge production and dissemination, Lévy regards the openness of the Internet as a “shifting space of interaction among knowledge and knowers in deterritorialized intelligent communities” (15). What is emphasized in Burgess, Green, and Lévy’s conception of online practice is the ostensible freedom that Internet users have in their movements through borderless cyberspace, and the purported free reign to do what they will with the information encountered in their virtual explorations. Leaving aside challenges to this notion of freedom, the repurposing of star images seen in these videos corresponds with my argument that the Internet theoretically allows anyone to perform the role of curator, not just in the selection and preparation of images and information for presentation, but also in exerting some control over how meaning is construed and data is interpreted. While the extent of freedom and amount of control volunteer amateurs actually have is debatable, these mediated remembrances matter not only because they retain an artifact’s presence in cultural discourse through virtual preservation, but also serve as a record of the reception of that artifact and its intertextual orbit, with individuals voicing their opinions, interpretations, and affective response to media they find important or interesting.

This kind of self-presentation through pop culture interests demonstrates that the Internet is more than simply a forum that makes fan practice and fan communities visible, it is “also a performance space for fans” (Staiger, *Media* 107). Part of this performance in the case studies I’m examining is the enactment of certain tastes and knowledgeability in how these amateurs present their interpretation of Bara in their mediated remembrances. Taste in music, perhaps more than any other cultural form, has come to be a major definer of “who we are,” both to the self and to others. Regarding the influence of popular music on identity, Keith Negus finds that

cultural identities “are actively created through particular communication processes, social practices, and ‘articulations’ within specific circumstances” (100).

In the “specific circumstances” of the tribute videos, selection of musical accompaniment is the “personal touch” that communicates something of the maker’s identity. It is also perhaps the primary way the makers manifest their tastes as part of their interpretation of Bara. Some are highly idiosyncratic and ironic in their selection of music, media footage, and manner of presentation, such as “Teddy Bear Evil Picnic,” which juxtaposes images of Bara and other silent-era actresses with photographs and cartoons of bears, interspersed with footage from *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and set to a bouncy version of the song “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic” (Jcutts2).

Most of the video tributes, however, feature more expectedly apropos soundtracks, and demonstrate the multiple choices involved in this aspect of the production. Musical selection is not just about affixing something of the maker’s identity to her or his production, but also becomes a form of curatorial practice, creating the context in which the viewer will experience and interpret Bara. Producers of these video tributes must weigh the selection and “suitability” of their choices with an anticipated audience, or the potential viewers with whom they are most eager to communicate: there is, after all, quite a differential in implied meaning between a slideshow of images set to a Vivaldi concerto and one set to Madonna’s song “Erotica.” Basil said that he was first inspired to create his video portraits, which are set to several copyright-free short instrumental open-source music clips, after being “dismayed” that so many other video tributes to old stars he viewed on YouTube were set to what he considered inappropriate rock music soundtracks: “I realised the work was mainly produced by young people who loved the old movie stars but used their favorite music to accompany the images. I found that hip-hop and

heavy metal rock music did not sit well with me, especially looking back” to the first forty years of the twentieth century.

Because of the cultural capital connected with classical music, choosing it (or even some of the open-source “classical lite” instrumental music) to accompany a video tribute could create an association of “classiness” and sophistication with knowing about Bara. For the same reasons of cultural capital, classical music accompaniment might also be interpreted as elitist, or peg the video as something for older or “uncool” audiences, potentially alienating some viewers. Basil felt otherwise, saying that his choice to use instrumental music gives his videos “a more international appeal as it removes the obstacle of language.” Rachel, too, chose instrumental music for her video tribute that she felt fit Bara’s image because of its “haunting and dark but classic” sound. She said she has received many positive responses from viewers who expressed appreciation that her soundtrack enhanced the “vintage feel” of her presentation (e-mail interview).

The ability of music to give their creations a certain “feel” is a choice of which my informants were well aware. Basil said he considered the selection of music as important as the images in his videos, since it “aids my projected impression of each individual Star,” adding, “I feel that my style of presentation and the use of ‘mood music’ will enhance the memory of these Stars. Thumbing through a book of Hollywood pictures gives some pleasure but bringing those pictures to life with an emotional presentation becomes a memorable experience.” As Basil indicates, soundtrack selection is also seen by many of my informants as a signifier of their affective response to Bara, and a device by which they might elicit a desired response from viewers.

Use of current popular music styles can prompt widely disparate responses to video tributes. On the one hand, more recent pop and rock songs can provide an interesting contemporization of Bara's image, and recontextualize the past in a way that might make old films and stars seem more relevant or interesting to younger viewers. On the other hand, these same actions can also drain the imagery of important socio-historical content—erasing, for example, the sexist implications of how Bara was presented by making the imagery appear to be a third-wave feminist celebration of sexual agency, as happens when the almost cartoonishly libidinous “Erotica” is the backing track. Additionally, because viewers are likely to have stronger opinions and more pronounced likes and dislikes regarding popular music more familiar than classical or instrumental music, song selection may repel viewers who are interested in old films and stars, but dislike the accompanying track. Unlike the more neutral, rather generic sounding open-source music clips, which tend to serve as background atmosphere, popular songs can make a video seem more about the producer's interpretation of a star's image, but can also foreground the song to the point of diminishing the presence of the star.

Selection of music, then, is a means of directing viewers to certain ways of interpreting the images and Bara—another aspect of production of which my informants were very aware. Regina spoke directly about choosing accompanying music that expresses her interpretation of Bara's biography and image, and also comments on her attachment to the star. She has two video tributes to Bara on YouTube. For one, she selected the Kate Bush song “Babooshka” as the backing track because she felt the lyrics, about a woman disguising herself to test her husband's fidelity, suited Bara's film roles. Her other selection, Madonna's “Live to Tell,” was chosen “because it has a very eerie feeling about it...that gives me almost the same feeling that I get from looking at Bara's films or images, and the sad lyrics makes me think of how tragic it is that

so much of her work is lost.” The audio track on the latter video, however, has been “disabled” at the demand of the music company that holds copyright on Madonna’s music—a frequent impediment for amateur video producers.

For other informants, soundtrack selection was based on complimenting and reinforcing Bara’s connection to the goth subculture (discussed previous chapter). Harriet, for example, chose the song “Lullaby” by the Cure in part because the band is frequently associated with goth music, and she felt that “the presence of the song on the soundtrack might attract viewers from the Goth subculture, who would perhaps appreciate and enjoy the images.” Flappergirl had also originally chosen the Cure’s eerie “Lullaby” to emphasize the “terrifying” aspect of Bara’s image. As with Regina’s trouble with copyright restrictions, flappergirl was made to remove the song by site administrators because of copyright issues. She replaced the Cure song with one by Evanescence, another band frequently identified as “gothic,” and whose lead singer, Amy Lee, has a Bara-ish vamp image (e-mail interview).

By contrast, images of Bara and other celebrities of the first three decades of the twentieth century, most now in public domain status,<sup>7</sup> provide a degree of freedom for volunteer amateurs, exempt from the control wrought by media corporations in restricting use of copyrighted materials. Basil, for instance, said other YouTube users had warned him that videos had been removed or blocked because of their use of copyrighted music. “I have been lucky to survive so far,” he added, “and my choice of music has probably helped.” Run ins with copyright holders are a major source of consternation and protest amongst individuals posting on YouTube, who see their creations as fair use of the materials, and the “cease and desist” practices of the entertainment industry as censorship and infringement on their creativity. Likewise, many regard YouTube administrators’ compliance as equivocation on the site’s purported role as a forum for

personal expression. Burgess and Green see YouTube as a mediator between “various competing industry-oriented discourses and ideologies and various audience- or user-oriented ones” (37). Old media (images of Bara) being coded with new significations through other, complimentary or contrasting recent media (online video sharing sites, anachronistic musical accompaniment) reflect the competition Burgess and Green describe, particularly between industry and audience. Whether YouTube or other dot.com sites can truly mediate in this conflict, which includes both economic and ideological differences, is an ongoing question. It’s also a question that, if Hartley is correct about contemporary society being characterized by the practice of redaction and “re-editing” texts across the mediascape, is going to affect more people in more ways, and in more aspects of cultural production.

In addition, competing *intra-audience* discourse amongst viewers is a highly visible aspect of YouTube’s interactivity. Burgess and Green, in fact, propose that the practices of site visitors, such as “quoting, favoriting, commenting, responding, sharing, and viewing” “leave traces” that affect the “common culture” of online production and participation (57). They contend that the kind of “extra-textual and intertextual material” that audiences are likely to bring to a particular video through their comments, responses, and links, determines reception as much as the content of the video itself (47). Similarly, Anil Dash contends that the “credibility, richness, and critical value” of web-based content is enhanced by “asides, interjections by third parties, annotation, hyperlinks, and so on,” all of which, Hartley points out, are characteristic of YouTube. In this way, YouTube video can be interpreted “not as a linear performance of the authorial self but as a concurrent performance of connectedness, collective intelligence,” and cultural storytelling (Hartley, “Uses” 138).

Although I agree that paratexts to these video tributes such as viewer comments, view counter, and amounts of “likes” or “dislikes” can influence reception, I also think these scholars may be overstating the importance of these materials. Not all viewers, after all, pay attention to these paratexts, and so the kinds of exchange that occur on YouTube probably have minimal impact on collective intelligence and cultural memory—certainly less impact than the content of the videos themselves. Where I do find their arguments most compelling, however, is in thinking about the collaborative story told through expressions of affect, both by a video’s creator or uploader, and viewers leaving comments. Perhaps the comments create a sense of connection, especially when discovering that others share interest in a little-remembered subject; perhaps the affective responses voiced by others reinforce, oppose, or threaten one’s own. Although “flaming” (leaving hostile or insulting comments directed at others) and “trolling” (inflammatory or off-topic commenting meant to disrupt online discourse) are in little evidence amongst the civil, even gracious, comments left on most of YouTube’s Bara tributes, one does include a surprisingly hateful and homophobic flame campaign directed against a viewer who opined that Bara looked like a man (LisaAlgozzini). The assemblage of words, images, and music, of emotions, opinions, and unexpectedly passionate reactions evident in these videos and their paratexts speak to the process of revisionist memory, and the role of affect in preserving Bara’s image and making it available for repurposing.

### **Online Discussion Boards and the Interplay of Collective Intelligence**

While I regard video tributes’ function more in terms of mnemonics and information *sharing*, I find the kind of interactive knowledge *production* described by Hartley, Dash, Burgess, and Green to be far more efficacious in other Internet forums. Interactive cultivation of collective intelligence is most visible in online discussion boards, but also occurs in consumer reviews on

Amazon, the Internet Movie Database, and other commercial sites. The IMDB discussion board on Bara, for example, which as of August 2012 had forty-two topic threads, tells a compelling cultural story about how current day audiences integrate and share their interest in Bara. Topics include the correct pronunciation of her name, which of her lost film others would most want to see, her goth cachet, and who should be cast as Bara in a hypothetical biopic.<sup>8</sup> Browsing the discussion boards also reveals speculation about Bara having liaisons with Milton Berle and Alla Nazimova, a game of making up absurd fake biographical information, in the spirit of Fox's early publicity, and even a link to a PDF file of an article on Bara from the October 1919 issue of *Vanity Fair* uploaded by a participant.

Scanned magazine articles are not typical of user-generated content on commercial sites, but are fairly common on the handful of discussion boards exclusively dedicated to silent and early sound film. These sites are more focused in their efforts to share not just impressions and opinions of stars, but also research and primary source materials, in collectively building a more complete understanding of aspects of film history obscured by passage of time and changing tastes. In discussion threads on one such site, NitrateVille, a participant or visitor interested in Bara can access hard-to-find materials uploaded by site members, including old newspaper clippings, advertisements, programs, and magazine covers (including the June 17, 1916 issue of *The National Police Gazette*, featuring Bara and her beloved Russian wolfhound



Figure 4.6



Belva on the cover) (Figure 4.6). Additionally, site users also supply hyperlinks to materials they've found elsewhere on the web, such as clips, old fan magazine articles and photos, or in one case, a link to an auction site giving information on some of Bara's costumes sold in 2008.

Other members on NitrateVille have shared more ambitious research projects and creative endeavors. The site includes audio of one member talking about Bara for a radio program called "Around Cincinnati."<sup>9</sup> Another forum participant has created an elaborate, meticulously researched travel guide of locations significant in Bara's life, divided into an 1885-1905 section on Cincinnati; a 1905-1917 section on New York; and a 1917-1955 section on Los Angeles (Burbankbob). Others have provided information and criticism after having chances to see hard-to-access films such as the comedy short *Madame Mystery* (Wallace and Laurel, 1926), or a documentary made for French television in 2003 titled *Theda Bara et William Fox* that includes footage from two unidentified Bara films, or the unreleased documentary *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes* (discussed below). For many, the only way to experience some of these films, such as the elusive *East Lynne* (Bracken, 1916), which "does not go over well with modern audiences" (silentfilm, "Two Orphans"), is vicariously, through the reports of forum members who live near enough sites of major film festivals to attend. One forum participant saw *East Lynne* at Cinecon in the 1990s, and describes the event in a way that speaks to fans' desires to access rare artifacts that pertain to their specialized interests and tastes, as well as the sense of community one may find in doing so:

[T]he movie blows. It's *so* bad that even *this* audience, the most sympathetic audience imaginable, was laughing at it.... It was just *such* a bad movie. And yet I didn't mind having gotten up in the middle of the night, and driving 400 miles to watch it. To see a screen legend in such a rarity, in the company of so many other hopeless obsessives, was

somehow worth it all, and the quality of the movie was irrelevant to the experience (Snowden).

With so much of the collective intelligence about Bara (amongst uncountable other subjects) generated by “unofficial” amateur cultural gatekeepers, though, should there be concern that they will “get it wrong,” and disseminate erroneous or purposefully “spun” information in their role as historians and curators? While this inevitably does occur, it is also important to complicate the idea of what constitutes correct information in this context. Rather than holding to the notion that there is some unassailable “truth” to be discovered, I am more inclined to regard truth in this context as a matter of dialogue rather than a competition between various facts vying for supremacy. In analyzing participatory volunteer knowledge production, the concept of collective intelligence challenges the idea that there must be one established true and correct version rather than unofficial *versions* in a state of interplay. No one participant within a knowledge community is expected to have all the information about a subject; rather, the members of the community share their individual knowledges interactively, whereby the concept of “truth” is fluid and ever-changing, always subject to contestation, clarification, and correction. I find this evident in the NitrateVille discussions, in which participants work collaboratively to root out the veracity of certain claims, such as rumors about the survival of footage from other Bara films (*Camille* [Edwards, 1917] and *Madame Du Barry* [Edwards, 1917] being the usual suspects), weighing evidence, sharing personal communications with archivists, finding flaws in the claims, until eventually concluding the rumors are false.

This illustrates Lévy’s contention that the collaborative nature of online knowledge communities reduces the circulation of misinformation through an inherent self-policing component within what Jenkins refers to as a “self-correcting adhocracy” (*Convergence* 255).

Jenkins contends that knowledge communities “must closely scrutinize any information that is going to become part of their shared knowledge, since misinformation can lead to more and more misconceptions as any new insight is read against what the group believes to be core knowledge” (*Convergence* 28). To this end, the nature of collective intelligence prompts individual members of a knowledge community “to seek out new information for the common good” (*Convergence* 27). While faith in the “auto-correct” mode of collective intelligence may be somewhat optimistic, I did find considerable encouragement and input on the NitrateVille forum for site participants wishing to conduct independent research. This includes tips and suggestions from other participants about where to find materials, with a lengthy, multi-participant thread on “How to search film archives.”

Thus, the participation, sharing, and contestation within the knowledge space do not result in a free-for-all, but neither do such activities inspire a utopia of kindred souls. Jenkins’s valorization of interactive collective intelligence avoids issues of hierarchies within the knowledge community, the competition to claim epistemological authority, and the sometimes rancorous debate about what constitutes truth. Recognizing the potentially disruptive arguments over content, most online discussion forums have site administrators to maintain order (and civility) in the process of knowledge construction. As noted, the web should be regarded as “performance space” for fans to establish and display their identity, and much of this identity performance within knowledge communities has to do with communicating certain tastes, opinions, and bodies of knowledge as superior. On forums such as NitrateVille, I find this performance of identity often involves a conspicuous demonstration of erudition, connoisseurship, non-mainstream tastes, and devotion to classic cinema ignored by the masses. “Truth” may be dialogic in knowledge communities, and correctness of information determined

by collaborative process, but hierarchies are nevertheless inevitable, with some participants perceived by other users as more authoritative, through their greater access to resources, personal archives, more persuasive rhetoric in their presentation of information as correct, or larger number of posts.

The production of collective intelligence online, along with the process of policing and correcting the flow of data, I contend, has much to do with this kind of identity performance, and appears to be motivated at least as much by conveying a sense of one's superior knowledge, intellectual one-upmanship, or even argumentativeness as by, in Jenkins's view, a sense of community and concern for "the common good." Of course, the same action can perform all of these functions simultaneously; the construction of collective intelligence, intentionally or not, also constitutes a collaborative mediated remembrance. This kind of intelligence production, equal parts communal and argumentative, is exemplified by a thread on NitrateVille sparked by the claim of two hosts of a "popular alternative media program" that they discovered footage from Bara's version of *Cleopatra* on a video tape found at a Coney Island book exchange.

Several forum participants (some of whom described the story as "fishy" and "total BS") responded with their opinion that it was not Bara in the accompanying clip. The two individuals who had discovered the footage steadfastly insisted that it *was* from *Cleopatra*, prompting one forum participant to comment, "Just because someone says the same stupid thing 500 times doesn't mean that it isn't a stupid thing." Implying that their claim was a matter of self-aggrandizement, the same commenter wrote, "They got attention for their website. Mission accomplished" (Rodney). Rather than just negating the dubious claim about rediscovering part of *Cleopatra*, however, site participants also offered many suggestions about what film the footage *did* come from, displaying their knowledge of now obscure silent films and stars that have been

forgotten by mainstream audiences. In what another forum participant applauded as “excellent detective work,” one contributor identified the footage, comparing it with still images, as being from *another* sought-after lost film, *The Queen of Sheba* (Edwards, 1921), starring Betty Blythe, the actress hired by Fox to take on vamp roles after the studio did not renew Bara’s contract (Figure 4.7). The still images were included with the post, letting other forum members weigh the evidence for themselves. The two finders of the footage admitted on the forum that it *might* be from *The Queen of Sheba* rather than *Cleopatra*. Even though the footage was misidentified as being from *Cleopatra*, it was still an important discovery, one that merits professional attention and care.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 4.7

Interestingly, the same thread also speaks to the perceived tension between professional and amateur archivists. The two people who found the footage also claimed to have “contacted over a dozen film archives” to examine the footage, “but they didn’t bother to return our phone calls or e-mails.” While one forum participant deems this claim “bogus,” it does suggest that there is at least an assumption that professional archives will snub amateurs. The cultural effects of the divide, actual or presumed, between institutional archives and amateurs will be explored further below.

Whether community-spirited or self indulgent, participation in knowledge communities may have consequences beyond information construction or remembrance. Jenkins maintains that collective intelligence encourages unconventional ways of integrating knowledge, writing, “Far from demanding conformity, the new knowledge culture is enlivened by multiple ways of knowing” (“Interactive” 140). In this sense, “how we know and how we evaluate what we know” becomes as important as *what* we know in these online knowledge communities (*Convergence* 44). For some within a knowledge community, then, learning about Bara may be less a matter of determining which data are correct than developing more personalized meanings and individualized uses for a star’s image. The attraction of being part of a knowledge community may in some cases have more to do with affective matters, related both to feelings about a star and a sense of connection to like-minded others, than with data construction/collection or online identity performance.

Indeed, as my informants reported, making connection with others through the interactive process of knowledge formation is among the most important reasons for posting their creations online. Basil described his experience with creating and posting video portraits as “life-changing,” saying that he was prompted to create more videos after receiving positive comments on his first effort within two hours of first posting it. Commenting that “my geographic location (is) no barrier to reaching out,” Basil said he has visitors to his YouTube channel from all over the world. His videos receive “over 25,000 hits per week,” and have been “adopted and linked” to other sites.

The social aspects of participation in a knowledge community facilitate the flow of information as well as enhance the memorability of a star like Bara. Most of my informants specifically addressed the importance of the Internet providing them with information and ideas

they likely would not otherwise have about Bara, and often in a way that indicated the value they placed in online interactivity. Regina, for instance, spoke of the pleasure she got reading the thoughts of others on Bara's life and films, and said, "It's nice to see that there are people paying tribute to her all over the world." Likewise, Rachel reported that most of her research on Bara has been done by surfing the web and communicating with other YouTube users, saying "I enjoyed talking to people about Theda the most, because I gain a perspective on why others like her."

Jonathan, "as the fan of an obscure star," also noted that he had learned a lot about Bara from other people encountered online, commenting, "As a researcher, it is also nice to be able to read and learn from others who have researched the star." In addition, he said he found it "comforting" realizing "that other fans share your (unusual) interest," and that this was in part "why other fans' works, such as websites and books, are important." That Jonathan located importance in the comforting as well as the informative aspects of the knowledge community speaks to the degree that affective response to a favorite star can shape interpersonal communication, and evoke pleasure in the acquisition and exchange of information about that star.

Collaboration and exchange within the knowledge community can also inspire new productions that convey information in different ways, and in forums that may reach different audiences, as in amateur-made video compilations of still images, music, and editing effects. Although he is interested in the silent era, Basil admits, "my knowledge (is) quite limited compared to the specialised knowledge of some of the people that contact me," including film historians and others he described as "an invaluable source of information, giving frequent exchanges of interesting facts." Basil's subsequent use of that information reflects Jenkins's

argument that online spaces of information exchange are sites of “multiple and unstable forms of recontextualization,” in which “meaning is a shared and constantly renewable resource and its circulation can create and revitalize social ties” (“Interactive” 140).

Also looking at the recontextualization of information, Lipstiz argues that even at the “microlevel of reception,” the pleasures of reworking preexisting media into new forms “can shape new kinds of cultural expressions.” He uses the example of sampling in hip-hop culture, where the interpolation of older music into new compositions not only turns consumers into producers, but also becomes a way of accruing status by displaying one’s knowledge about past popular culture (*American* 265). In a way that illustrates how the reworking of media artifacts can be a collaborative process, Basil noted that the information he acquires through others often inspires new projects, and said that he has begun making video tributes based on requests and suggestions from viewers and subscribers to his YouTube channel. He also said that he has been contacted by relatives of Jean Harlow and Lillian Gish, and has received permission through correspondence with Marlene Dietrich’s grandson to produce a series of video tributes to the actress.

Recontextualization within knowledge spaces, I would argue, also means that participants can find expanded use value in popular culture artifacts by recognizing their adaptability. This becomes especially significant in light of Lévy’s theorization that knowledge communities’ collaboration on collective intelligence can serve as a model for a truly participatory democracy. Jenkins refers to collective intelligence as “an alternative source of media power,” saying that while people now engage in this “collective power” as a form of recreation, “soon we will be deploying those skills for more ‘serious’ purposes” (*Convergence* 4). Participating in a knowledge community, then, becomes a way of preparing media consumers



for how “culture might operate in the future” by engaging in “play patterns” through their interactions with others in collaborating and sharing knowledge (“Interactive” 134). As Burgess and Green argue, participation in “practices and collectivities that form around matters of shared interest, identity, or concern” is a component of contemporary citizenship (77).

With online collective intelligence in practice, I would also argue that the ongoing deferment of what constitutes “true” knowledge also makes participants aware that memory and history both are always in process, always contestable, and always subject to change. Jenkins describes the “disorderly, undisciplined, and unruly” nature of collective intelligence as both its strength and its weakness, noting that “there are no fixed procedures for what you do with the knowledge” found in the collaborative space (*Convergence* 53). With this in mind, I see the major concern with volunteer amateur historianship not so much in what is said than in who is able to participate, and how those who *do* participate make sense of the collective knowledge community. Although most aspects of online participation remain at a niche micro-level, the question is nonetheless raised as to what degree the actions and input of an individual can influence cultural memory and the shape of history.

### **Too Much Information: Websites and Navigating the Knowledge Space**

In this section I explore how media consumption is tied to the cultivation of media literacy, and how amateur-produced websites fit in this process. Part of this discussion focuses on the ways new media is changing the nature of cult fandom, and how the production of meanings, value, and memory is becoming more collaborative within a subcultural domain in which secretiveness and exclusivity were formerly paramount.

As data within a “vast archive,” content uploaded to the Internet remains “unfiltered,” according to Burgess and Green, until it is made use of “through repurposing and re-presentation

elsewhere” (90). While writing specifically of YouTube, their thoughts on content only being “filtered” and being given meaning through its reception apply equally to online interactivity as a whole. As texts not just about the production and dissemination of information, but about presenting that information in a specific, more personalized context, individually authored websites and blogs, in particular, typically exert more conscious, concerted influence on how viewers might “filter” the content they encounter: they become a way of performing the self on the Internet, making affect, opinion, tastes, and personal stories visible as part of the shared data. Looking at Judy Garland fan websites, Steven Cohan finds evidence of how the personalization of response to a star acts as a frame of interpretation. He notes that fan postings can be “motivated by both ambivalence toward and respect for the authenticating status of facts,” and often reveal “the writer’s self-consciousness of fandom as an interested reading of Garland.” This indicates, he argues, that fans knowingly assume an “active role in the continual reconstitution of her star text, correcting the dominant readings promoted by the various media and accepted by the general public as ‘factual’” (126).

As this indicates, the reconstitution of “star text” can be politically motivated, as with the battle of interpretations studied by Cohan between gay and straight fans over use of Garland’s star image. Political motivation of a different kind, involving matters of remembrance and forgetting, also inspire the remediation of Bara in personal websites. Jonathan’s work was inspired by his desire for Bara’s films specifically to be remembered. He created his website “The Lost Film Legacy of Theda Bara,” because he “was frustrated by the neglect of her films,” saying “It seemed to me many were lying in vaults somewhere, and no one cared enough to rescue them.... I wanted to shine a light on Bara’s films.” His initial interest in Bara stemmed from wanting to find out more about the lost version of *Cleopatra*. Jonathan said that he came to

find an appeal in “The obscurity and the legend of this star, and the fascination of the lost treasure of her film legacy.” Conscientious of his project as an intervention into cultural memory, Jonathan said his efforts were in response to what he saw as “a ‘newer is better,’ disposable culture” in which “the old things are forgotten in favor of the new.” He felt that his project, very much in process at the time I spoke to him, would be the first to document all of Bara’s films with corresponding stills or publicity images, with aspirations to uncover what surviving footage, if any, still existed from her lost films, and where. Bara in this case served as the connecting element in the mediated remembrance of dozens of forgotten films.

Admirable and ambitious as Jonathan’s project is, it is perhaps too daunting, and too discouraging, an undertaking for a lone amateur, and he did express disappointment that his site was not more widely viewed, and received little response. In regarding both intelligence and memory as collective and collaborative projects, any sense of locating a core “truth” sought through conventional approaches to the archiving and writing of history is problematized, for in history as well as memory, truth is never locatable in only one place. The specific objective of the knowledge space, Lévy writes, is “to permanently negotiate the order of things, language, the role of an individual, the identification and definition of objects, the reinterpretation of memory” (17). In this sense, with more minds directed to the pursuit of knowledge about a specific topic, uncovering the range and shades of “true” history is more possible—at least in theory. In practice, perhaps the only real attainable goal, and maybe the more important one, is not coming to conclusions (which will always be challenged) about the formulation of truth, but in learning to negotiate and evaluate information, and to collaborate with others in the process.

Rather than devolve into a cultural cacophony, the unruly but vibrant churn of ideas shared via the web can thus become a way that individuals condition themselves to filtering the

onslaught of data that bombard us every day, much of it from the mass media. In this light, making one's own sense of overabundance can be empowering rather than overwhelming. Sara Gwenllian-Jones proposes a similar idea in developing a counter-theory to what she sees as the dubious claims that "good" fans actively and willfully subvert the culture industry. She critiques this resistance model of fandom by observing that it violates its own ways of understanding readers, authors, and texts. For that model to work, she argues, it is necessary to regard the media text as "already complete" when encountered by a media consumer, which only allows the fan to *react to* but not *rework* its contents (174).

In arguing against evaluating fan responses in terms of how effectively they oppose commercial culture, Gwenllian-Jones theorizes fan reactions as a way of purposefully and analytically interacting with the media in a market economy that we can never escape anyway (179). She ascribes agency not to a media user's capacity to resist, but to develop his or her own mode of "informed involvement." What matters, according to Gwenllian-Jones, is the ability to strategically navigate the mediascape. Cultivating the agency and the ability to negotiate one's way through the overwhelming influx of mediated messages are the primary concerns of media literacy. For the media literate, the ability to navigate one's way through media means that users can become aware of their ability to engage with participatory culture, to share, intervene, critique, collaborate, and thus influence the reception of information.

Media literacy, in fact, depends on there being more information available than can be absorbed, necessitating the cultivation of an ability to evaluate, compare, make choices, and think critically about sources of information. Over-reliance on the most easily accessible commercial product stifles the development of collective intelligence, narrows the range of things that are archived, preserved, and remembered, and limits opportunities for more incisive

discourse. For instance, as Klinger points out, both academics and general audiences may be sidetracked from more critical research and analysis by the small bits of information provided by the media industry in director's commentary, "making of" documentaries, and other "insider" features on DVDs. The seeming invitation to become "experts" by assessing this specialized knowledge is illusory, Klinger maintains, since the kind of knowledge provided to audiences in these extra features tends to be the kind of trivia easily controlled by studios and "substantially informed (though not wholly determined) by industry discourse" (*Beyond* 73). Although media users may feel that they are acquiring knowledge that is "more important and authentic than the 'stuff' intellectual accounts issuing from official sources," they are assimilating and disseminating a predetermined roster of knowledge as endorsed by the industry (*Beyond* 73-4).

In the case of Bara, where almost no such media industry product exists and information must be sought elsewhere, knowledge may be freed of such constraints, compelling those interested in her to put greater effort into their search for information. The required "D.I.Y." component of finding information about Bara, however, may also mean that knowledge becomes more contested without a commonly recognized base. In his study of fandom of the science-fiction television series *Doctor Who*, Alan McKee examines the negotiation of what "counts" as correct information in a way that he proposes circumvents the standard assumption that industrial production is somehow "official" (and therefore amasses power to the producers), and audience productions are "unofficial" (and reinscribe how little real power the audience has over the media). McKee observes that the trans-media productions emerging from *Doctor Who*, both those of the industry and those of fans (the various television series and spin-offs, stand-alone novelizations, fan fiction and artwork, magazines both professional and amateur, etc.), are so numerous that it becomes extremely complicated trying to decide what fits into the "official"

canon. As such, both industry and consumers become aware of the audience's capacity to profoundly affect not only the intertext surrounding the program, but also the text of *Doctor Who* itself by influencing programming decisions. The canon, therefore, is always in flux, and always individualistic.

While *Doctor Who* is a specialized case, in which an overabundance of signifying materials has made the canon a matter of participation and intervention rather than a directive, parallels can be drawn to the mediated remembrances of Bara online. In this instance, however, it is a matter of *limited* rather than *excessive* materials, with the surviving fragments of Bara's stardom pushed to do extra work in how they convey meaning. Volunteer amateurs have had significant input into determining, if not exactly a canon, then a wide range of remembrances, interpretations, and uses of Bara's image that assume a position of "truth." The collective, participatory nature of knowledge greatly enabled by new media means that it is not just the volunteer amateur producers of mediated remembrances that influence what we know and remember about Bara, but also the individuals who encounter their productions. As Hartley, writing specifically of user interactions with content and one another on YouTube, suggests, participation on the site—even just watching videos—builds digital literacy, and because "anyone can join in," this "ups the productivity of the whole system" ("Uses" 132).

Ideally, the interchange between media users in collectively producing meaning and remembrance of Bara represents an assertion of agency in how audiences use mass media products. Remediation and collective intelligence are undoubtedly changing fandom in numerous other ways, one of which, I argue, is a critical adaptation of the practice of cult fandom to new media and increased interactivity. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bara is in many ways a cult figure. Being a fan of, or even knowing of, Bara carries a distinctiveness and degree of

cultural capital in certain, often subcultural, social contexts, because it indicates specialized tastes and the cultivation of knowledge. Since obscurity and inaccessibility carry a premium in cult fandom, and familiarity with the esoteric is regarded as the mark of the true cult fan, there is undoubtedly distinction in appreciating a movie star from days of yore whose movies, by and large, don't exist anymore.

Aside from obscurity, objects of cult fandom are conventionally characterized by attributes such as their “difficulty” or level of sophistication demanded of their audience, their “subversive” content, or an ironic “it’s so bad it’s good” aesthetic. As a star who falls outside the mainstream and requires commitment to learn about, has been interpreted as symbolic of women’s refusal to submit to men, and has been seen as a particularly egregious example of an outmoded, now laughably histrionic acting style, Bara fits these additional qualifications as a cult figure. Further, use of the term “cult” has increasingly (if problematically) been applied to a type of fan practice and degree of devotion rather than a particular object of that devotion. For instance, it is the passionate response of some fans to the film *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), a mainstream favorite with a worldwide box-office gross of more than a billion dollars and the antithesis of other films widely recognized as cult such as *Pink Flamingos* (Waters, 1972) or *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977), that has led to it being dubbed a cult film. As responses by my informants in this and the previous chapter indicate, Bara still evokes a considerable amount of cultish devotion in some fans.

Analysis of Bara as a cult figure also sheds light on how the collectivity of knowledge facilitated by new media, and the relative ease with which volunteer amateurs can produce and share mediated remembrances through videos, websites, discussion boards, and other forums, has diminished the secretiveness and exclusivity that previously have been perceived as

characteristic of cult fandom. While the pool of Internet users seeking out or even stumbling upon information about obscure or barely-remembered films and stars may remain small, there is indisputably far greater potential for “outsiders” to discover covert knowledge than in prior, non-digital cult forums. Further, the online display of “alternative” tastes and accrual of status from holding and sharing arcane knowledge appears to be taking precedence over exclusivity in some cases. There are numerous possible reasons for this shift. For one, it may be an unintended side effect of making connections with other cult fans in the relatively open field of cyberspace, in which exclusivity breaks down. But the shift in cult fandom may also be purposeful and intentional, with the opportunities made possible by the Internet for fans to take on the roles of amateur critics, historians, archivists, and curators requiring the sharing rather than hoarding of information.

Of course, there will always remain a contingent for whom knowledge and private collections of films or ephemera are a matter of secrecy and denial of access to others; Dye, for instance, spoke of his frustration that his reconstruction project has been impeded by private collectors he’s approached who “sit on their treasure troves of stills like dragons guarding their hoards,” refusing access (e-mail interview). For those of a different mindset, participation in collective intelligence about a film or star is a way for fans to take pride in their specialized knowledge and tastes, and accrue subcultural capital in positioning themselves, through their performance of “specific competences and dispositions” (Jancovich and Hunt, 27-8) as discerning and informed *connoisseurs* rather than the undifferentiated mass of general audiences. While making accessible things that were previously held as secret and exclusive undercuts one of the principal markers of cult fandom, fans likely also realize that objects of cult veneration can become too obscure or forgotten to carry social meaning. The sharing of knowledge, in this



sense, is a trade-off, in which loss of exclusivity is mitigated by the satisfaction of performing cultural work that informs and preserves the memory of things fans find important, which at the same time keeps the knowledge that may bestow subcultural capital upon them in circulation.

New media and collective intelligence are challenging cult exclusivity in other ways as well. As a number of media scholars have pointed out, cult fandom is tied to class; Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt, for instance, write that cult tastes and practices are frequently connected with social and economic privilege, coupled with a feeling of distinction from and superiority to indiscriminating mass audiences (42). In the previous chapter, I observed that interest in Bara was almost always connected to class privilege: higher education, access to books, libraries, computers, and other media resources. Although ownership or even access to a computer with an Internet connection are still tied to class issues, the Internet is still a far more public, munificent means of attaining the “specialized” knowledge of cult fandom. Similarly, feminist scholars such as Joanne Hollows and Jacinda Read have argued that many cult tastes and practices have functioned as a way of excluding women. New media not only undercut the exclusivity of a “boy’s club” mentality by facilitating access, but also promote girls and women learning, discussing, and passing on information and ideas about popular culture artifacts that would fall outside the existing quasi-canon of cult items, and in forums that bypass established, exclusionary “fan boy” domain. The fact that women make up the majority of producers of mediated remembrances interviewed for this chapter, and that Pickford specifically spoke of her work as an alternative to the less-than-welcoming attitudes of older male silent film *connoisseurs*, illustrates this point in action.

Before pronouncing new media and collective intelligence as the way to make cult fandom less elitist and more democratic, however, the often-contentious nature of online

knowledge construction must be addressed. Cynthia Erb, while noting that online postings and displays of knowingness are acts of participation in fandom, also observes that hierarchies exist within online fan communities: “Fan responses do not simply state or explain; they compete, as fans issue statements designed to both link themselves to other fans in the community and to stake their position by foregrounding their own expertise” (xiii). And while online participation in cultural critique means that cult items will become less exclusive, there is little chance that most will “go mainstream,” simply because many are still marginal texts and less likely to be sought out by large numbers of people. The possibility that Internet users will “stumble upon” obscure or arcane older media they weren’t seeking out is very real, but remains a matter of chance. Potential for discovery of a previously unknown media artifact, however, is greater if we consider the role of the intertext as a network of connecting threads that might lead an Internet user along a chain of associations into virtual *terra incognita*. As illustrated throughout this dissertation, a surprising number of artifacts have unexpected intertextual connections to Bara. All told, if we consider the question of whether the Internet, participatory culture, and repurposing have changed the nature of cult fandom, the answer is “yes” if exclusivity and obscurity are regarded as the distinguishing characteristics of cultish devotion. If, on the other hand, we regard defining traits such as making connections with likeminded others, perhaps even becoming part of a community, and performing certain tastes and passions as part of one’s self-definition, then new media has facilitated rather than altered cult fan practice.

### **Buying Bara: Consumerism as Remembrance**

The Internet is not just a virtual marketplace of ideas and information, but of buying and selling consumer goods. Even though very little industrially produced Bara-related merchandise exists, a

handful of artisans creating handmade goods based on images of Bara have made the Internet as a site of commerce also a site of remembering Bara. Although the consumer base for such goods may be negligible, the searchable component of online interactivity means that even a small niche audience can seek out items catering to the most specialized tastes and discover cottage industry entrepreneurs on independent vendor sites such as Etsy, Zazzle, and CafePress selling “just the thing.”

Buying or wearing goods featuring Bara’s image is an example of Matt Hills’s concept of *performative consumption*. “Dramatizing” one’s “affective relationship to a text/icon” through what is purchased, worn, used, or displayed, according to Hills, is simultaneously an outward performance of taste and identity, a marker of “communal...exchange-value” within a specific cultural context, and “a matter of intensely private or cultic ‘use-value’” (*Fan* 170). As Sarah Thornton has famously argued, even the most “oppositional” subcultures are dependent on consumption for the very definition of that subculture, and while these consumers hardly fit the bill as an oppositional subculture, their actions may nonetheless represent what McRobbie has called “subversive consumerism” (140).

“The present emphasis on consumption” in cultural studies, McRobbie contends, is part of a “process of reinstating the consuming subject in a role other than that of passive dupe” (33). While commercial culture has the potential, according to Lipsitz, to make consumers feel powerless and to “think that politics are impossible,” it can also contain “contradictions that may yet connect us to a broader social world,” thus making consumer culture “only one of many terrains where political struggle may yet take place” (*American* 257). In this instance, consumer choice represents an active seeking out of alternatives to the mass-produced products more readily (and therefore, passively) found in corporate chain stores, thereby encouraging the

growth of an “underground” micro-economy by supporting independent artisans making new or repurposing old goods meeting the unmet demands of a non-mainstream consumer base. Because the kind of small-scale entrepreneurship based on handmade goods or refurbished used goods seen in local craft fairs, consignment shops, or online vendor sites is able to cater to specialized tastes, it becomes an unexpected form of preserving the memory of popular culture of the past. With images of Bara and other silent-era stars that have fallen into public domain status, artisans can tap into the public’s fascination with popular culture and celebrity with little fear of being bullied by copyright holding entities. At the same time, this freedom of use means that silent-era stars may be repurposed, made more visible, and therefore remembered at least in part because they are now dissociated from corporate control.

The artisans I interviewed both said they had been somewhat surprised by the response and sales of their Bara-related goods. Astrid, who makes and sells jewelry, cigarette cases, and other items decorated with images of Bara and other old stars, said she began producing these goods out of her “obsessive pop culture collecting” with particular interest in the “kitschy.” She came up with the idea to create jewelry after losing a bid on a necklace “which featured a pop cultural image” she had wanted on eBay, and deciding she could simply make her own. “I had many great ideas to draw from given my extensive pop cultural knowledge and collections,” she said, adding that since the images on her first pieces proved marketable, she created a wider variety.

Astrid said that while she has an appreciation of Bara, “I would be deceiving myself if I said I didn't want to make a buck.” She based her decision to produce goods with Bara’s image on her marketability to “goth culture and other subcultures” and on the connection between Bara and the widespread interest in ancient Egypt: “We know a lot about ancient Egypt but it is also

enigmatic and mysterious, and Theda Bara channels that mystery.” When asked about sales of items with images of Bara, Astrid said they have been higher than expected. “I wasn’t sure if the younger generation even knew who she was,” she said. “We have such a media overload in our culture but it is mostly focused on the celebrities of today.... I thought maybe Theda was lost in the shuffle, but perhaps not as much as I originally thought.” Astrid added, “Fans love that I am making items with her on them. Items featuring her image are not common in the market and fans love being given the ability to have an item they can wear or carry with them everyday.”

David, the other artisan with whom I spoke, designs and creates paper dolls based on his interest in theatre and costume design, as well as subjects “I was teaching or reading about at the time” (e-mail interview). The eclectic selection includes figures and costumes drawn from literary works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pepys, Moliere, and Oscar Wilde, Commedia dell’Arte, and ancient Egyptian, Medieval, and Renaissance art. “As an artist, I’ve never created a set with someone else’s vision or whether I thought they were a “moneymaker, ”” he

said. “Theda Bara: Just a Nice Jewish Girl from Cincinnati,” the only paper doll set he’s created thus far based on cinema, was made in 2006 using Photoshop and Corel Painter (Figure 4.8). It features nine costumes from *Cleopatra*, one from *Madame Du Barry*, two from publicity photos,



**Figure 4.8**

and, besides a Bara figure, includes figures of Fritz Leiber, Sr. (Julius Caesar), Thurston Hall (Marc Antony), an extra from *Cleopatra*, Bara's dresser, Charlie Chaplin operating a movie camera, and even her dog Belva. David said that he considers himself "a theatre/maybe film historian" who loves "trying to understand why the early stars were so popular."

David's Theda Bara paper doll indicates not only how micro-entrepreneurship can perpetuate a memory of Bara, but also how indirect interest in areas such as fashion history or costume design may lead one to discover or learn more about the star. He said that his research on costuming for various productions of *Cleopatra* led him to realize "that the image of the semi-nude Bara is one of the most recognizable images of the Egyptian queen." Although he expressed that he was "rather fascinated" by Bara's career, David said he "might be more of a fan of the costumer who did such often outlandish interpretations of Cleopatra" than of Bara herself.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the webpage for his Bara paper doll features extensive information about the actress and the film as well as the costumes, including a bibliography and links to other sites. Regarding the response he's received for his Bara paper dolls, David said he is "often surprised by people writing" him with inquiries about that specific set. "I'm not sure whether there's a market for Bara's image, although she is certainly is a ubiquitous film icon," he said of the fact that he'd sold several sets of the Bara doll when he was marketing it on eBay.

A number of factors across time and social change have acted fortuitously to keep the Bara image circulating in at least the margins of cultural discourse. Uncountable other stars of the past have not had the same luck. In her study of the recycling and repurposing of clothing as part of subcultural style and economy, McRobbie notes that the sources "raided" for "'new' second-hand ideas" include old films. Observing that something simply being old does not automatically make it of subcultural value, she writes, "For every single piece rescued and

restored, a thousand are consigned to oblivion” (140). Although she’s referencing the sale of clothing in the micro-economy of second-hand vendors, McRobbie’s thoughts apply unsettlingly well to stars of the past—people valued if they are able to retain cultural currency, forgotten if they are unable.

### **Reconstructing *Cleopatra*: Still Images and Mediated Remembrances**

Amateurs having access to media outlets that make their work visible to mass audiences is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, however, the differential in resources between amateur collectors and professional archivists has meant that amateurs often have had to focus their efforts on “alternative” matters and materials, such as ephemera. This is a situation that has, in actually, been a tremendous boon to media heritage.

With virtual collecting of ephemera, it is not surprising that my informants emphasized the centrality of photographic images of Bara in sparking their interest and inspiring their projects. “I would even go as far as saying,” Harriet told me, “that the still images (of Bara) have actually intrigued me more than the moving ones.” While this is not to make a case that still images are a substitute for lost films, I am suggesting that still pictures and motion pictures can have quite different connotations within patterns of discursivity. Even if more of her films survived, still images of Bara would communicate to the spectator in ways the moving image could not. Saying that Bara “exists primarily in our imaginations and photographs,” Jonathan compared Bara’s stardom to that of some current stars whose fame is “not necessarily dependent on...films.” Despite this, Jonathan said his interest in Bara “lies less in her image than her artistry,” stating that he believed Bara to have been a great actress, and wishing that this could be verified since it “cannot be judged by photographs” (Figure 4.9). Assessments of Bara’s acting

abilities can only be, for the most part, a matter of speculation, although Eve Golden commented on her hopes that her biography of Bara will return her “back where she belongs, in the top tier of silent stars,” in part by citing reviews that indicate “she was a much better actress than just her photos indicate” (e-mail interview). To most of Bara’s



**Figure 4.9:** Extant ephemera, such as this lobby card for *Her Double Life* (Edwards, 1916), may not accurately convey information about Bara’s acting style or ability, but influence the ways she is remembered all the same.

current day fans, whether or not she was a good actress is a matter of little concern, as I suspect it may have been even in the 1910s. Regardless of being a good actress, Bara was a good star, which can be a very different matter.

Remarking on the irony that it is the still images rather than the moving that have preserved her memory, Dye speculated on their importance in keeping Bara in memory, saying “she is so visually striking that even stills of her resonate with silent film fans and film historians in a way in which her rivals still can’t compete,” projecting an exotic mystique that “makes her a more beguiling subject than a bigger but more mundane star, say, like Norma Talmadge.” The importance of still images to motion picture history is underscored by Dye’s ongoing project of compiling and sequencing surviving images from *Cleopatra*, the most famous and lamented of Bara’s lost films, to indicate what it might have been like. Similar still image reconstructions have been created for other lost films, including Tod Browning’s *London After Midnight* (1927),



F.W. Murnau's *4 Devils* (1928), and Sergei Eisenstein's *Bezhin Meadow* (1937), and to "fill in" for lost footage from Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), and George Cukor's *A Star is Born* (1954).<sup>12</sup>

Still reconstructions are, of course, a somewhat makeshift solution to film loss, and typically elicit an "it's better than nothing" reaction. Houston refers to still-image reconstructions as "treating the film as a museum object for study rather than as something that might still be supposed to entertain." She writes that reconstructions, while "worth doing," can only ever be "a series of hopes, guesses, compromises and approximations" (134). Preservationist Daniel Woodruff, who has made still recreations himself, regards the situation differently. Unlike Houston, he finds them of value not just as documentation, but also because there is "still an emotional pull derived from the presentation of the series of images combined with the original synopses," making them "entertaining as well as informative" (63). Pragmatic about expectations for a still reconstruction versus those for a rediscovered motion picture, Dye remarked, "As Pygmalion I don't expect my Galatea to come to life, but at least put on a good show."

Dye reported that he was inspired to undertake the project while researching *Cleopatra* for an article, and discovering 200 still images from the film in the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Pictures.<sup>13</sup> Prompted by "a combination of interest in the star, the movie, and a yearning to see a lost film," Dye figured "already being a filmmaker, the next logical step was to do a video still reconstruction." Using the original script as a guide, Dye evaluates the images he has been able to acquire to determine what aspect of the narrative they are intended to illustrate, a process he describes as "a little like a paleontologist assembling a great prehistoric beast from remaining fossilized bone fragments."

Deducing the sequence is made easier by the fact that Bara wore a different costume for each sequence of the narrative (reportedly over fifty costume changes) (F. Thompson 76). The



**Figures 4.10 and 4.11:** Stills from the only known surviving footage of *Cleopatra*. The seventeen-second fragment, archived in the George Eastman House, shows Bara in one of the film's notoriously body-revealing costumes, turning slowly screen right and sneering. The fragment is possibly a costume test rather than footage used in the film itself.

process is made more difficult, however, by the fact that *Cleopatra* director J. Gordon Edwards “had a tendency to throw out the script and develop his own take on the storyline.” After sequencing the images in a “rough order,” Dye said he then determines how to use various techniques to “convey the storyline and mimic the flow of the film as it may have been; using close-ups where appropriate, dissolves, and ‘camera movement’ when that works,” as well as recreating dialogue and descriptive title cards. Although a score was composed for *Cleopatra*, Dye has been unable to track it down, and said that if the reconstruction is ever released, it would actually “be better for a new score be composed to match the dramatic action,” since the original score would no longer synch with the recreated sequencing (Figures 4.10; 4.11).

Dye said that the reconstruction endeavor, which he had anticipated as “a quick and easy project,” has taken well over a decade thus far, in large part because of other professional commitments, but also because of difficulty of locating materials. Part of the difficulty, Dye said, was that since she was the star attraction, almost all of the publicity images feature Bara, making it difficult to recreate the film's grander set pieces, such as the naval battle of Actium. Many of

the most commonly reproduced images from the film, of Bara striking “awkward ‘Egyptian poses,’” are of little value for use in the reconstruction, Dye said. He speculates that more photographic documentation of the shoot existed at one time, but images that didn’t include the star were likely “not considered valuable by movie collectors and were discarded.” Some scenes may have to be cut entirely from the reconstruction “simply because of the dearth of stills to depict them.” While this necessitates that he “speculate and improvise to fill the gaps,” Dye said, “in the absence of the real thing, I plod on, like Frankenstein stealing body parts to assemble his monster.” He also said that he’s had some trouble acquiring additional materials because of the restrictive policies of some archives.

When asked what he regards as the cultural significance of his reconstruction project, Dye mentioned several objectives behind the effort. His version of *Cleopatra* is intended to “at least fill in a gap in part created by the loss of the film,” so that individuals “studying the history of film will not have to do all the research I have done on the film.” Dye also spoke of wanting to bring more attention to the film itself, and provide a better sense of “Bara the actress (rather) than Bara the half-naked vamp.” The “main goal” behind the project, he said, “is to underline the loss of the film, and have people yearn to see the original, and hopefully not be too satisfied with my reconstruction.” The impetus behind this, Dye reported, is to call wider attention to the larger issue of the loss of film heritage, “all the films that have been lost (or) those being lost now through neglect and lack of funds to preserve them,” and to raise support for film preservation.

Speculative recreations based on still photographs, meticulously collected, researched, and sequenced as with Dye’s project, have tended to be the solution favored by media industry professionals and academics in actualizing an approximation of a lost film. While similar reconstructive endeavors by amateurs are scarce, some do exist. With Bara, these tend to be *re-*

*enactments* in the form of short films, imagining what the star and her films might have been like, rather than still-image reconstructions. These include the “Vamp Supreme” segment of the well-researched short film *Edendale Follies*, made by pre-teen and teenage students in a youth workshop at the Echo Park Film Center in 2007, using the *Cleopatra* script as the guide for part of their recreation (discussed Chapter Two).

As with “A Vamp Supreme,” another recreation of *Cleopatra* re-imagines both the lost film and Bara’s image. In “Granny Mae does the Late Late Show,” a comedy sketch video



**Figure 4.12:** Cleopatra’s death scene in “Granny Mae does the Late Late Show”

posted on YouTube by stand up comedian Diana Salameh, *Cleopatra* miraculously shows up on television. The video begins with a toothless old “white trash” woman rousing from a drunken stupor to blearily take notice of what’s on TV and exclaim “Oh my god, that’s Theda Bara!” The video then cuts to a black and white recreation of the conclusion of *Cleopatra*, where

after learning of Mark Antony’s death, Cleopatra (played by the same performer as Granny Mae, presumably Salameh, in a black wig and jeweled headdress) commits suicide by forcing a venomous snake to bite her (Figure 4.12). Bara’s histrionic death scene causes the old woman to bawl uncontrollably before passing out again. Within the recreation segment, Bara’s stagy, overdramatic acting style, as well as the bargain-basement props and sets (Cleopatra’s throne is a rattan chair; the fatal asp is obviously rubber) are played for laughs, but the sketch nonetheless serves as a mediated remembrance. While it may not carry the authority of a still reconstruction in conveying an accurate impression of a lost film, parodic recreations such as this may have

greater reach, and therefore more impact on cultural memory, due to their greater accessibility through video sharing/social networking sites.

### **Access Denied: The Media Industry, Archives, and Accessibility**

With their increased experience, skill, and resources, in theory media professionals should be able to make an even more significant contribution to cultural memory than amateurs, yet one of the issues that blurs the lines between amateur and professional in this case is the matter of distribution. Contravening expectations, new media outlets are allowing amateurs to make their works accessible to audiences with far greater ease than with the professionals to whom I spoke. Dye was unsure if his reconstruction would ever be released. This is also the situation with a highly accomplished 100-minute documentary on Bara titled *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes*. Aside from Golden's and Ronald Genini's biographies of Bara, *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes* is the best and most compelling source of information on Bara. The documentary was produced in 2006, but as of 2012 is yet to receive commercial distribution, leading one commentator on IMDB to lament that it, like so many of Bara's films, appears to be "lost" (MJ2000).

Neely, the co-founder of Timeline Films, is the director, narrator, and along with Andie Hicks, the writer, producer, and editor of *The Woman with the Hungry Eyes*. He said he initially began thinking of making a documentary on Bara in 2004, when Hugh Hefner told the filmmakers that "he would look kindly on proposals to create documentaries on subjects from film history that might not be commercial enough to attract funding from television broadcasters" (e-mail interview). Neely said that he researched film history to "find someone who represented a 'cinema first'; someone who might not otherwise be given 'a documentary of her own.'" Although he already knew of Bara (saying that she was still a household name when

he was growing up), he questioned whether there would be enough material, in light of so many films lost, to make a documentary viable.

As with numerous other cultural productions based around Bara, however, publicity photographs are marshaled as historical documentation in place of film footage, although the documentary does include some clips, including the seventeen-seconds' worth of surviving footage from *Cleopatra*.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the documentary features recreations recounting Bara's life story and interviews with Golden and Genini, cultural critics Bram Dijckstra and Molly Haskell, film historian Robert Birchard, and relatives of Bara's husband Charles Brabin, with voice-over by actress Dana Delany as Bara. Neely said that the choice to present Bara's story as a "mix of a straightforward biography with a gently impudent commentary" was meant to reflect what the filmmakers felt was "Theda's own attitude towards the world." Remarking on the distinction between Theda Bara the image and Theodosia Goodman the "real person," he said, "She knew she was playing a fantasy, not a reality, and to limit the story of her life to a campy presentation would be to completely lose sight of the woman behind the role."

Regarding the unavailability of the documentary, Neely said "Thus far, the distributors I've approached have not felt they could make their money back in a reasonable amount of time." He also said that the Turner Classic Movies network, which has broadcast others of his documentaries on silent-era stars including Mary Pickford, Clara Bow, and Louise Brooks, has not been captured by "the allure of the fair vampire." Ideally, Neely said, the documentary would be released in a multi-disc package that would collect Bara's three extant features along with Dye's still reconstruction of *Cleopatra*, although he is realistic about the likelihood. "Given this situation, I'm now in the process of re-evaluating my distribution options," he said. "We may even look for away to self-publish or facilitate downloading on the internet."

Projects like Neely's documentary and Dye's reconstruction may remain inaccessible to audiences indefinitely because they are not seen as commercially viable by the distribution channels filmmakers have historically depended on to make their work available. Sales potential, however, is not the only circumstance that constrains efforts to remember Bara in mediated form. Dye reported that progress on his recreation has been hindered by difficulty in obtaining materials, saying that while many of the archives and libraries he's consulted have been helpful, others have been "frustratingly bureaucratic and sometimes unresponsive to inquiries." While it is somewhat surprising that archives would deny access to a media professional, refusal of access to a volunteer amateur outside of academia or the media industry, such as Jonathan, is all too common. Both Jonathan and Dye spoke of having to buy materials from memorabilia dealers, photo services, and eBay vendors that they might otherwise have been able to find in archives. Jonathan spoke of his trepidation about relying on such purchases as data, not just because of the expense, but because so often they are "undocumented" and he has to "question the accuracy of what I find."

### **Towards an Archives and Amateurs Collaboration**

Accessibility, along with interactivity, is the most vital aspect of amateur volunteer online archiving; it is also one of the most pressing issues for conventional archives. In this concluding section of the chapter, I argue for a more collaborative relationship between institutional archives and amateur archivists and curators, and examine how new media may facilitate the cultivation of this relationship through increased access. Such a relationship would be mutually beneficial; amateurs might be able to take on some of the work of institutional archives, while at the same time calling attention to the usefulness and cultural value of those institutions. In return, institutional archives would contribute greatly to the production of online collective intelligence

by sharing their holdings through the efforts of amateur archivists and curators. Here, I give an overview of some of the major issues faced by volunteer amateurs, institutional archives, and the flow of information, with suggestions for how greater collaboration may alleviate some of those issues and contribute to the actualization of a “living archive” as an accessible, interactive, and inclusive knowledge space.

Archives have a mandate not only to collect, but also to catalogue, preserve, and conserve artifacts, many of which may be rare, of high monetary value, in fragile condition, and susceptible to damage if made use of, handled, or even exposed to light or the wrong temperature. In this regard, the limitations put on access are understandable. At the same time, the exclusivity of archives defeats the very purpose of collecting materials, if inaccessibility means that potential cultural wealth lays dormant, unused, and forgotten. This sentiment was stated bluntly by the Committee for Film Preservation and Access, which in their 1993 statement to the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress wrote, “Preservation is great, but preservation without access is pointless.” As professional archivists themselves have noted, the exclusivity of many archives increasingly depletes their cultural relevance. “There is much talk everywhere,” writes Houston, “about the ‘film heritage’, the ‘cultural patrimony’ and the need to ensure its preservation. At the same time,” she continues, “partly because the archives have kept themselves to themselves, there is little general awareness about the history of the archive movement, about its many current problems, or about preservation policies” (4). Houston warns, “Archives must find the way to unlock more of what they have in their vaults, or seem still to be conserving material for the hypothetical needs of future generations, always waiting for demands which may never be made” (106).



Likewise, Horak argues that public perception about accessibility, already greatly altered by the ubiquity of the Internet, drives general response to archives:

If archives, other public institutions, and the corporate world don't meet the access expectations of the general public and their elected officials engendered by the Internet and other digital technologies, it will have a direct effect on public perception of the nation's archives, influencing public support for preservation funding, and thereby ultimately determining survival rates of analog and digital moving images. ("Gap" 30)

Jerome Kuehl, too, sees "something of a vicious circle" in the policy of many archives, particularly in the blow to innovative research that results from access restrictions. With archives limiting access, those that *do* gain entry will likely be less experienced in how to actually *make use of* the archive. What filmmakers, documentarians, and scholars produce will no longer break new ground "because they won't have the time to look for the new and interesting sources of material." As a result, "They will continue to recycle the things they have seen before, simply because they know where to find them." This process of cannibalization of pre-existing materials to produce "new" research is, as Kuehl sardonically comments, "not terribly good news" (qtd. Houston 123). If this indeed remains the case, even for professionals and academics, knowledge formation could become redactive acts similar to the reassembling and re-presenting of materials that have been the only option for most volunteer amateurs.

While new media provide users with many beneficial opportunities for access to and interactivity with the production and dissemination of information, over-reliance on the World Wide Web as an archive, or as a substitute for other sources of information that the public are discouraged or prevented from accessing, obviously stifles the circulation of new information and new ideas—and increases the likelihood that those things not represented on the web will

simply be forgotten. Already, many “of the current generation” are under the impression that, as Peter Walsh put it, if it’s not on the Internet, it must not exist (30), and much of the general public, according to Horak, “believes that every film and television program ever made has already been digitized and is now available in Netflix’s catalog of 70,000 titles or clipped on YouTube...while total Internet access is just around the corner” (“Gap” 29). Among my informants, Pickford spoke of the ambivalence many volunteer amateurs feel towards the web as an accessible but incomplete and sometimes unsatisfying resource, saying she could use a search engine to find at least *some* information on even obscure early cinema celebrities like Helen Gardner or Valeska Suratt, “something that would have been very hard in 1989 without sifting through microfiche.” However, as she also observed, “Despite the love of Theda there isnt (sic) anything really solid about her online,” only the same “Cleopatra and vamp...photos over and over again.” The ease of accessing the seemingly abundant resources on the Internet may prevent media consumers from looking elsewhere, and re-encountering the same data repeatedly instigates a cycle of meanings and uses recycled rather than repurposed—a situation explored more fully in the conclusion.

As the expectation for instant access becomes more commonplace, what happens when we’re denied that immediate gratification, or denied access at all? One probable result is that those unable to access a particular media title they have been seeking out will simply give up in resignation and move on to something else. Dangerously, this leaves less accessible artifacts to slip further and further from collective memory, diminishing the possibility they will receive attention for preservation, perhaps falling victim to the same fate as so many of Bara’s films. In some cases, though, inaccessibility may be a motivating factor for volunteer amateurs. Part of the impetus that prompts participation in the online knowledge community is frustration or anger

directed towards the media industry for leveling threats against “the little guy” over use of copyrighted material, for withholding desired titles that matter to non-mainstream audiences and cult fans, or for having been too short-sighted and profit-motivated to bother protecting and preserving its own output. Jonathan, for example, said that he began his project because it might perhaps “make some people feel guilty for letting (Bara’s films) rot and disappear forever.” As this indicates, volunteer amateur archivists and curators sometimes produce meaning in opposition to or out of indignation at the impression that “official” arbiters of taste and history are doing it wrong.

Economic factors drive a film’s chances for its very survival, let alone greater accessibility through digitization. Such considerations, in Horak’s words, reify a small Hollywood canon, “which marginalizes box office failures, silent films, documentaries, independent films, politically hot topics, etc.” (“Gap” 35). Additionally, works that have entered public domain, and can no longer make money for a studio, are especially vulnerable to inaccessibility and loss through neglect. These “market logic” considerations mean we only receive a “fragmented, incomplete, and distorted view of film history” (“Gap” 39); audiences communicating and sharing of knowledge is essential to keep such vulnerable films, their stars, and their filmmakers from being forgotten.

Fortunately, there are fans, even if a small minority, who act on their concerns that works they deem important are being neglected and subject to forgotten-ness. Such individuals can be vital (though not always successful) in pushing for preservation of cultural heritage, including those artifacts that might otherwise be overlooked. The importance of this is highlighted by Klinger’s argument that efforts to make the public aware of film preservation “show the substantial investment of some social and media institutions in defining classic films as

unmediated signifiers of American history,” thereby promoting a problematic vision of American exceptionalism and superiority, and exerting tremendous influence on making the public’s understanding of the past synonymous with the media industry’s portrayal of the past (*Beyond* 124). However, as Klinger also contends, old Hollywood films “can be mobilized to support diverse and even conflicting visions of the past, based on context” (*Beyond* 132). In the context of the World Wide Web, providing ways for a greater diversity of information to enter into collective intelligence and cultural memory would contribute to a richer concept of cultural heritage overall.

Greater access to institutional archives through digital resources would expand the potential for this to happen, by making primary source historical materials available to the public at large rather than the pre-packaged history depicted in commercial media. Archivists themselves recognize that accessibility through digitization is an imperative they ignore at the peril of richness of cultural heritage—and their own relevance. The “success of the archival profession,” according to archivist Eric Ketelaar, “depends upon the extent to which we can make our archives...into people’s archives” (118). Likewise, Horak contends, “Unless archivists, academics, and cinephiles make a concerted political effort to increase public funding for digital access to non-commercial and public domain material, the archive of our collective visual past may indeed remain invisible to all but a handful of specialists” (“Gap” 40).

Whether the familiar perception of archives as spaces where even treasures may get lost amongst the multitude of materials awaiting rediscovery and attention is accurate or not, Houston points out that archives tend to err on the side of amassing too much rather than too little, and that the more uncertain one is about the value of the collected artifacts, “the more assiduously we are likely to store them, in the ‘secret hope’ that they may have something to say to a future

generation” (161). As Mary Ann Doane describes the situation, “The aim of this historiographic/archival impulse is to retrieve everything possible, driven by a temporal imperative (before it is ‘too late’) and the anticipation of a future interpretation (in this sense, the archival process is a wager that stacks the deck: this object, because it is preserved, *will* be interpreted)” (*Emergence* 222). Even the “stacked deck” remains out of reach for most of the public, however; rather than anticipating some hypothetical future use of the materials, archives and the public both would be better served by a focus on actual use in the present.

Theoretically, then, expanding access to archival collections could benefit institutional archives, which are almost invariably understaffed, under-funded, and underappreciated. The enormity of the task facing such archives is not just a matter of collecting and storing, but also of making sense of collected artifacts and data—a duty in which volunteer amateurs could make valuable contributions. Expanding access would mean more minds concentrated on making sense of the massive amount of information stored in the archive. As Gwenllian-Jones, Jenkins, and Lévy have argued, the general public is already becoming well versed in the skill of sorting, evaluating, and interpreting an overabundance of information through their use of the media. When volunteer amateurs succeed in making their findings and interpretations part of a broader knowledge space, it conceivably alleviates some of the demands placed on official archives. Further, when a greater number of people become aware of their ability to contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, archives undoubtedly would more relevant to a broader public. Expanded access to archives could make the overly optimistic expectations for knowledge communities to become self-correcting closer to reality, as evidenced by the input of contributors on the NitrateVille forum (discussed above) whose research has gone beyond Internet searches.

These contributors are not only equipped to relay information gleaned from primary source materials, but are regarded as more authoritative by others within the knowledge community.

Volunteer amateur archives and online remembrances, I argue, present a means for examining the importance of retaining awareness (even if perpetuated by only a small but passionate faction of media consumers) of otherwise inaccessible or even lost cultural artifacts. This awareness is important not just because it allows us to retain a sense of cinematic heritage as a meaningful cultural expression that contributes significantly to our interpretation of the politics and sociology of the past and present, but as an admonishment to us in our duty to maintain and preserve our own cultural productions. Just as with film in the first decades of its existence, what may seem like expendable cultural detritus (websites, blogs, podcasts, fan-produced videos, online discussions) today may be the highly regarded but inaccessible artifact of the future. The Internet Archive, a non-profit dedicated to “offering permanent access for researchers, historians, scholars, people with disabilities, and the general public to historical collections that exist in digital format” (“About the Internet Archive”), serves as an excellent model for what can be done. The Internet Archive has made Bara’s *A Fool There Was*, along with thousands of other silent and sound films, easily available. It also allows registered users to upload materials, comment on, and in some cases download the materials they find within the archive; it simply needs increased awareness amongst the general public of its existence.

With a star such as Bara, who can and has been used to support or symbolize so many different points of view in both dominant and subordinate discourses, audiences expressing and disseminating their responses is not just some frivolous preoccupation. In consideration of the possible cultural, historical, and political ramifications of volunteer amateurs constructing Bara’s online presence, only the passage of time will really tell if the mediated memories covered here

will have significant lasting impact. Even so, I believe that the kinds of interpretations of Bara's image and popularity discussed in this chapter exemplify how historical media artifacts can continue to be relevant, even meaningful, to later generations of media users. Just as a figure like Bara, who continues to provoke controversy and fascination after almost a century—in spite of the almost total erasure of her filmic record—should not be taken lightly, neither should the cultural contributions of those individuals who seek out the nearly-forgotten wealth of popular culture's past.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 2 (June 1995): 230.

<sup>2</sup> In her study of film preservation, Penelope Houston indicates that amateur collectors, "who from the cinema's beginnings snapped up the unconsidered trifles that landed up on street market stalls, were left behind by traveling showmen or abandoned in derelict cinemas," are the reason why even many *films* are still extant (17).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this issue, see *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*. Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine, ed. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> This is a particular cause for concern for film archivists and preservationists such as Horak and Paolo Cherchi Usai, who caution that digitalization is not a reliable form of preservation, and is in fact more unstable than reproducing film on film.

<sup>5</sup> Expanded uses of new media in institutional settings, such as the increasing presence of interactive multimedia didactics in museums, may in fact be changing the role of professional curators to more closely resemble amateur cultural arbiters. As Andrea Witcomb describes this modification, professional curatorial practice is now—in theory—less about asserting authority over a body of knowledge and more about functioning as a facilitator of meanings (35). Ideally, this practice is about disseminating knowledge in a manner that does not discourage or negate varied interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> All informants are identified either using first name only, a pseudonym, or an online user name, based on their stated preference. Volunteer amateur informants were located by searching online, both general searches and site-specific searches on sites such as YouTube, eBay, and various online discussion boards. Informants agreeing to participate in my interviews were initially given a survey asking about their interests and reactions to Bara's image. The surveys were followed by more in-depth questions based on the responses the informants provided; all interviews were conducted through e-mail.

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<sup>7</sup> According to law professor Dennis S. Karjala, works published before 1922 are in the public domain; the status of works published between 1923 and 1963 depends on whether the copyright holders formally renewed the copyright when it expired, 28 years after the initial publication date.

<sup>8</sup> Drew Barrymore and Christina Ricci appear to be discussants' top choices to play Bara, with Chloë Sevigny, Demi Moore, Zooey Deschanel, Melanie Lynskey, Mira Sorvino, and singers Siouxsie Sioux and Amy Lee among the other suggestions.

<sup>9</sup> The site apparently does not have its own file server, meaning that users must upload image files they want to share onto a photo hosting sites like Flickr or PhotoBucket and create hyperlinks to let others access the materials.

<sup>10</sup> The progression of the debate over the identity of the clip can be followed on the thread "So is this for Real?" on NitrateVille.

<sup>11</sup> Although the costume designer for *Cleopatra* is listed as George Hopkins on the Internet Movie Database, Eve Golden's biography of Bara specifically says the designer is unknown. Hopkins, also known as "Neje," designed Bara's costumes beginning with *Madame Du Barry* (released two months after *Cleopatra*) throughout the rest of her tenure with Fox. A 1919 interview with Hopkins for *Picture-Play Magazine* reported that "He admits to not being all that concerned with historical accuracy" (Brynn). While the historical accuracy of *Cleopatra*'s flamboyant costumes is highly suspect, it is still unclear whether Hopkins can be given credit for them.

<sup>12</sup> Two of these films have also been recreated in book form: Herman G. Weinberg's *The Complete Greed of Erich von Stroheim* and Philip J. Riley's *London After Midnight*.

<sup>13</sup> The images he is using for his reconstruction, Dye said, were not intended to document the film shoot, but are exclusively promotional, intended to be "printed in newspapers, magazines, press books, lobby cards, etc."

<sup>14</sup> This footage was also shown as part of Turner Classic Movies' program *Fragments: Surviving Pieces of Lost Films* in April 2011. The clip, which actually may be a costume test rather than footage from the film, shows Bara in a head to knee shot wearing beaded breast coverings and a drape of spangled gossamer, apparently speaking to someone offscreen, then cuts to a media close-up of Cleopatra smirking scornfully and turning to the right, all the way undulating like an ancient Egyptian Mae West. Because the clip has made its way to YouTube, it has become accessible to audiences, and has prompted numerous site visitors to express their wish for time travel on the clip's comment board ("Theda Bara 'Cleopatra'").



## Conclusion

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In the previous two chapters, my exploration of how Theda Bara is currently being remembered and repurposed focused largely on the actions of media consumers. By no means, however, should this imply that the mass media is not also playing a part in keeping her in memory and in use by recirculating her name and her image. Near the completion of this project, I became aware of several such cases that offer new directions for furthering my study. These include *The Director's Cut*, a mystery novel by Christopher DiGrazia published in 2011, featuring Bara as the protagonist in the first of a planned series of “Theda Bara Mysteries” (“Kiss Me”).<sup>1</sup> She has also turned up in a brief article on *Wired.com*, the online version of the technology and culture magazine, which presents Bara as a “prototype”—presumably of sex symbols or manufactured celebrities. Author Chris Baker describes Fox’s publicity campaign, referring to Bara as a “Polish-American starlet” who became “silent film’s supernatural siren.” Noting that her attempts to play virtuous heroines “always disappointed,” Baker concludes that this proves “there’s no escape from the dark side.” The online article includes a brief but evocative clip from *A Fool There Was*, in which Bara’s vamp taunts a man threatening to shoot her into killing himself instead—but not before commanding, “Kiss me, my Fool!”

Two instances of contemporary actresses, Thandie Newton and Glenn Close, being costumed and photographed as Bara, provide particularly interesting ways of examining not only how Bara is being repurposed, but also how the media affects cultural memory, and will be discussed in more detail below. Remembrance of Bara was also boosted when a character on an episode of the popular period drama *Downton Abbey* describes an ostentatiously over-extravagant modern bathroom as “like something out of a Theda Bara movie.” This mention of

Bara's name probably introduced a number of viewers to the star, and made her seem more intriguing by playing up her connection with opulence and excess.

While not making mention of Bara, I find another example from television provides an efficacious inroad for addressing a number of the ideas surrounding memory and culture explored throughout this dissertation, and frames these ideas in a way that facilitates my concluding thoughts. "Time Capsule," an episode of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, originally broadcast February 3, 2011, sees the citizens of the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana, squabbling over what should be included in a planned time capsule. A public forum on the matter quickly devolves into shouting, whining, and badgering, with beleaguered city employees attempting to retain some semblance of control. At issue is the complication that many of the forum's attendees want to include unlikely items that, on the surface, have nothing to do with the town's history. Several argue for the inclusion of artifacts that represent their affective attachments to popular culture: novels from the *Twilight* series; baseball cards; the autobiography of heavy metal singer David Lee Roth; a radio morning show DJ's rubber chicken prop. Overwhelmed by the often passionate feelings about these objects, the town's ever-intrepid deputy parks director Leslie Knope comes up with a solution: rather than trying to add all the desired artifacts, put in the videotaped record of the forum, which not only indicates the kinds of things people held to be important in that particular place and time, but will also show people of the future that their forebears held strong convictions about preserving these items for posterity. As another city employee concludes, Pawnee may be a town full of crackpots, but they are "weirdoes who care" about their community.

This *Parks and Recreation* episode humorously depicts a variant of the kind of grassroots contribution to cultural memory I have explored throughout this dissertation, in which media

audiences who care about certain aspects of popular culture have repurposed Bara's image so that it conveys different meanings and serves different purposes in varying contexts, across a span of generations. Recirculation in cultural memory—and the mass media—of her image acts as a form of preservation, but not one that holds her image in stasis, like a time capsule. Instead, it exemplifies an active remembrance, with adaptations of the image suggesting not only the capacity for individuals to contribute to cultural memory, but also indicating how the consumption and use of a star image can have meaningful impact on social realities. Uncovering and exploring these acts of repurposing, I have argued, are particularly telling ways of gaining a sense of “real peoples’” responses to their cultural surround, which serves as a historical record. Further, the same kind of information, because it can include points of view and reactions not represented in other historical forums, also provides vital materials from which we might be able to decipher an *alternative* historical record. Paraphrasing George Lipsitz, I'm working towards a historiographic form in which history is not represented as something that happens to people, but something *created by* them (*Footsteps* 80). To this end, a reception studies approach to Bara helps us see beyond the conventional and expected ways the past has been perceived, and expands our access to a useable past.

Throughout my dissertation, I've investigated why Bara is an especially effective case study in demonstrating how this works. Her usefulness derives from a variety of reasons: the open-endedness that the loss of her films places on audiences' acts of meaning-making; the longevity of her image's circulation in cultural memory and popular culture; the polysemic and palimpsestic qualities of her image; its multiple contradictions and ambiguities in relation to issues of identity politics; and most importantly, how all of these factors have influenced that image's adaptability to interpretations and uses that fit in with changing cultural-historical

contexts. I've looked to the past for evidence, at audiences who have conventionally been seen as marginalized (ethnic and immigrant women) and dominant (white middle class men) to uncover the varying and sometimes unexpected responses to Bara—responses that better help us see America of the 1910s as a multiplicity of perspectives and concerns. I have also charted a history of Bara's image as it has been burlesqued in the mass media, the arts, and amateur creative projects, examining how the intersection of parody and intertextuality expands horizons of expectations, with the argument that the resultant adaptability of star image not merely reflects but can also influence social and political change.

Investigating more recent audiences' patterns of reception, I've looked closer at uses and interpretations that counter the misogynist, ethnocentric, perhaps racist or anti-Semitic aspects of the vamp image, and repurpose it in ways that undermine these oppressive connotations through irony, affective responses, or emphasis of traits that resonate with subcultural concerns. Such acts of repurposing, I've argued, can be a form of identity work, at both the individual and collective level, and can also become the basis for amateurs to preserve and curate information, interpretations, and remembrances they find meaningful, thereby exerting influence on cultural memory.

One of my goals in exploring the uses and reuses of Bara's image has been to expand star studies, reception studies, and memory studies by putting them into dialogue with one another. By way of conclusion, I will look at some complications, even challenges, to ways I've been theorizing the intersections of media and memory. To avoid straying too far a field of my focus on film studies, my overview will by necessity be brief, and my purpose is not to arrive at any conclusive pronouncements, or to counter arguments that oppose my own. Rather, this investigation is to acknowledge that the interplay between audiences, stars, media, and memory,

even in a narrowly focused exploration such as this, is far more complex than can be explained by a single study, with innumerable factors keeping that interplay in a constant state of indeterminacy. A conclusion that raises more questions than it answers may seem irresolute, but I see it as the most reasonable and realistic way of assessing reception and memory, both of which by their very natures evade closure—which is precisely why they are so telling of the richness, complexity, and variability of peoples’ relation to their social, political, cultural, and historical contexts.

Through my research, I’ve determined that the polysemy of Bara’s image and audiences’ ability to rediscover new meanings in that image have been the major determinants of her remembrance. I’ve described Bara’s image as a palimpsest, with layers of signification. I’ve discussed the importance of ephemera in remembrance, as well as the significance of collecting, archiving, and sharing information and artifacts, looking particularly at these practices through new media. All of these circumstances mean that an abundance of information about Bara is readily accessible, but raise questions about potentially valuable data that may still exist, yet remain inaccessible.

The debate over what kind of data will best represent who we are to the future is a source of humor on the *Parks and Recreation* episode, but it nonetheless pinpoints the complexity of this matter in relation to archiving, historiography, and remembrance. Leslie Knope tells a particularly fervent townspeople that a time capsule is not meant to be “just a barrel full of stuff people like,” and this may be true of public, institutional, or “official” modes of representing a time and place to the future. The selectivity of these official records, however, further necessitates individualized, amateur efforts of preservation and remembrance to fill in the gaps of the historical narrative. These are opportunities for individuals to influence not just

remembrance, but also meaning—a situation with unpredictable ramifications, but one that will in any case contribute to a representation of a time and place as diverse, even divisive, but never static.

Leslie's solution to save the video record of people debating about their choices rather than the actual objects they deemed important also points out another significant aspect of representing a particular cultural and historical context: what's important is not just preserving the physical object, but also the attendant story about why this object mattered to someone. This, as any scholar of historical reception knows, is the critical piece that is often frustratingly missing. New technologies and the participatory and ostensibly inclusive nature of online culture in theory could change this, but the ephemerality of so much of the material on the Internet throws the matter into doubt. Likewise, the increase of interest in personal scrapbooking (and an attendant industry of consumer goods) that began in the 1990s may mean that there will be a trove of individuated remembrances saved for posterity, but such artifacts may only ever remain in private hands with limited, tangential effect on the historical narrative.

Historian Pierre Nora also addresses the issue of how artifacts represent a time and place in a study of what he postulates is a recent “world-wide upsurge in memory” that is profoundly changing how we relate to the past by shifting “historical awareness...into an awareness of memory.” Because we cannot know what peoples of the future “will need to know about ourselves in order to understand their own lives,” Nora contends, “the future puts us under an obligation to stockpile, as it were...any visible trace or material sign that might eventually testify to what we are or what we will have become.”

Nora's words could aptly describe the boggling amount of data accessible online, in which plenty threatens to become chaos—another condition that raises real concerns about the

role of digital artifacts in preserving culture. The seeming abundance of data accessible online, however, is largely illusory, with the bulk of material comprised of repetitions and variations of the same things. This illusion of plenty, coupled with ease of access, may in fact *decrease* media consumers' agency and activity, inhibiting further investigation as people settle for what's online rather than seek out information found in other resources. As a result, the already limited pool of materials about Bara or other aspects of popular culture will become increasingly constrained, as the most frequently repeated images and bits of information coalesce into a few dominant, standard interpretations. This would seriously diminish the polysemy and adaptability I've argued are crucial to Bara's remembrance, as well as the idiosyncratic, irreverent, and questioning responses to popular culture that can keep it culturally viable.

Conversely, there's also the chance that some idiosyncratic readings may become the dominant ones, and in doing so may alienate other segments of a potential audience. Will, for instance, Bara's current associations with the goth subculture limit her appeal to others outside the subculture? Further, the false assurance that digital copies of an artifact are plentiful may also decrease concern for the plight of tangible objects—a troublesome proposition, especially considering the decentralized sprawl of information on the Internet, and the very real possibility of data being lost in the throng, taken down, expiring, or otherwise fading away.

On *Parks and Recreation*, one of the factors motivating the impassioned public debate about Pawnee's time capsule is the fear that some things perceived as unimportant or unrepresentative would be remembered, while more “deserving” things will be consigned to obscurity. This can also be a concern for scholars. Nora adds another complication to this debate, implying that not only has the importance of memory been exaggerated, but so too have the objects which purportedly embody remembrance, and warns that we “would do well to question”

the “vestiges” by which we come to have a sense of the past. Along similar lines, Christopher Small cautions that we not “let our respect for the relics of the past inhibit our capacity to create culture relevant to our own experiences” (qtd. Lipsitz, *Footsteps* 104). I’ve explored cases in this dissertation that I see as having something akin to “respect” for old popular culture, but not to the degree that it is regarded as an untouchable museum piece. Rather, my informants indicate how media and stars of the past are being used as components in “creating culture” and thinking critically about the past’s relation to the present and future.

In her study of archives as part of cultural history, Carolyn Steedman addresses the emotional investment some individuals have in this kind of rethinking aspects of the past, especially the peoples of the past. Steedman cites nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet, who wrote of the relationship between historians and the dead, and of exhuming them for a “second life”: “They live now among we who feel ourselves to be their parents, their friends. Thus is made a family, a city community of the living and the dead” (71). This friendly, even familial feeling towards the long dead is not exclusive to historians, as evidenced by several of my informants who expressed true emotional attachment to Bara and other stars of long ago. Whether or not this reflects the intrinsic political conservatism that many scholars see as inherent to nostalgia is a matter too complex to address here, but I argue that affective attachments made through humanizing people of the past *can* become an inducement to seek out hidden or suppressed elements of the historical narrative.

Still, I recognize that my argument about the cultural, historical, and political value of amateur archiving, preservation, and curating may be an overly optimistic position. In valorizing these as actions that frequently contain affective as well as more conventionally informative content, I perhaps run the risk of overvaluing affect as a component of the historical record



(partially because of its rarity), at the expense of more objective, factual information. Using the term “revisionist memory” to describe remembrance—personal as well as cultural—as it is influenced and reconfigured by affect or emotion, I’ve focused largely on the theoretically progressive effects of locating evidence of peoples’ affective responses in the past, when in practice the results would be much more varied, including the re-entrenchment of dangerously reactionary ideologies.

Affect has been central in my use of Bara’s image as a lens through which to observe both the mass media and audiences reworking the past, particularly as these practices relate to identity politics. I’ve regarded Bara as a means of analyzing how media reception can connect us with a revisionist view of the past. The quest for the suppressed or ignored voices from the past, recovered through revisionist history, is often hailed in academia as a way establishing some degree of equity in representation, redressing the enforced and violent omissions of the past, and I have found Lipsitz’s work on popular culture as a means to uncovering a hidden past especially compelling and useful.

Nora, however, offers a different take, one that questions not only the role of affect, but also the value of revisionist history. I have not been overly concerned in my study with distinguishing between history and cultural memory, feeling a side trip into such a potentially sticky issue would too greatly diffuse my focus on Bara and popular culture. Nora, though, sees the separation of memory from history as crucial. The “outbreak” of memory, he argues, has brought about a situation in which “official” versions of history are increasingly regarded with suspicion, and remembrance is “bound up with minority groups for whom rehabilitating their past is part of reaffirming their identity.” As in revisionist historiography, he finds “a present that is overlaid with an awareness of its own history” “necessarily” allows for “several possible

versions of the past.” Nora, however, regards the “reappropriation” of history as a danger, exerting a destabilizing influence and opening the gates for the historical narrative to be “invaded, subverted, and flooded by group memories.”

The “real problem” with the elevation of memory, which he sees as subjective, individual, fallible, and divisive, over (ostensibly) objective, collective, verifiable, unifying history, Nora argues, is that memory is now invested with the authority “to know how, why and at what moment the otherwise positive principle of emancipation and liberation on which it is based backfires and becomes a form of closure, a grounds for exclusion and an instrument of war.” Precisely because there are now so many more participants in “manufacturing the past,” Nora says that it is imperative to cultivate a “duty towards history” rather than a “duty to remember.” Claiming “the right to memory,” he acknowledges, is “to call for justice,” but adds, “In the effects it has had, however, it has often become a call to murder.”

Does Nora’s warning have significance for film or star studies? I suspect he had in mind humanitarian crises such as those in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Chechnya rather than popular culture, but if I am making the case that cinema, celebrities, and repurposing old media are of social and political importance, then I need also recognize the repercussions and the unpredictability of what can be done with cultural products of the past in the name of ideology. I have proposed that individuals are better able and more likely to influence the shape and content of cultural memory than of history, but that the shape and content of cultural memory can exert influence on the telling of history. I stand by this claim, aware that there are likely almost as many contradictory and competing versions in cultural memory as there are individuals.

Having said that, I do find that Nora makes his point using the most extreme cases as support, when unpredictability works both ways. Barbie Zelizer argues that the unpredictability

of memory “appears to have significantly restricted our inquiry” for the very reason that “we are unable to predict many of those circumstances in which memory takes on new footholds” (221). But this uncertainty about the forms remembrance may take, and the discursive forums in which it may occur, might conceivably also be a site of intervention rather than a restriction. There is no way of regulating the formation of cultural memory outside the most repressive totalitarian states, but a realistic middle ground between pessimism and optimism may be found in evaluating how different types of memories of different subjects can have differing effects in differing contexts, just as varied or conflicting accounts of history can have various types of effect. As Keith Jenkins writes, “Between the Scylla and Charybdis of, on the one hand, authorised history and, on the other, post-modern pastlessness, a space exists for the desirable outcome of as many people(s) as possible to make their own histories such that they can have real effects (a real say) in the world” (80). Again, this perspective seems to presuppose outcomes that will benefit society, especially marginalized and under-represented groups, but on the ground those outcomes are uncertain, and as Nora fears, may be exclusionary, oppressive, or incendiary. I find it naïve, however, to regard history, hardly an objective, uninterested form of discourse, as having a unifying, or perhaps pacifying, effect within anything but the most homogenous of societies. The unpredictability of memory may make it as dangerous as it is potentially liberating, but any pretense towards objectivity or truth in history can be just as problematic—as the historical record itself bears out.

Towards further exploration of the connection between history, memory, media, and audiences, I see many directions in which my scholarship, still using Bara as the case study, could continue. Reports that a home owned by Bara in Cincinnati, on the campus of Xavier University, was demolished in summer 2011 (Kiesewetter) made me wonder about memorials or

other forms of remembrance of Bara in her hometown, and if Bara plays any part in how the city narrativizes, remembers, or markets itself. The overlap between popular culture and folk culture is another venue for exploring matters of reception, use, and remembrance in star studies. For example, children often riff off popular culture as part of their play, imitating characters, devising new narratives, and imagining new interactions amongst characters across media and across time: are there any corresponding practices in adults' reception of the media? Media technologies of the future may have significant effect on how—and if—Bara and other popular culture of the past are remembered and re-used. Of course, there is also the possibility, however remote, that some of Bara's lost films may be rediscovered. In his essay on the rediscovery of lost films, Jim Beckerman quotes film historian Leonard Maltin's response when asked if such films are ever a disappointment: "Almost nothing but" (79). What impact would the rediscovery of *Cleopatra*, *Salome*, *Carmen*, *Madame Du Barry*, or any of the other dozens of her lost films have on Bara's reputation as an actress, her place in film history, and audiences' interpretation and remembrance of her, particularly if the actual text does not live up to the text imagined and anticipated by fans and film historians?

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to two recent examples of film stars being photographed imitating Bara. A brief analysis of each reveals other nuances of Bara's image, of intertextuality's expansion of meaning, and of the unpredictability of using the media as a form of remembrance. The necessary brevity will hopefully still indicate that there are intriguing and informative possibilities for these case studies.

As part of the publicity campaign for the 2010 Virgin Media Shorts competition in the UK, actress Thandie Newton was photographed in costumes, created by British fashion designers, and poses based on studio images of Bara in *Cleopatra* (Figures C.1; C.2; C.3). The



**Figure C.1 (above):** Thandie Newton as Cleopatra



**Figure C.2 (above right):** Publicity photo of Bara from *Cleopatra*

**Figure C.3 (right):** Bara and Newton on Cleopatra's throne



fact that British *Vogue* quoted Newton as calling Bara “a true, avant-garde screen heroine” (Milligan), and that the images by celebrity portraitist Lorenzo Agius recall not only Bara, but also Richard Avedon’s 1958 photos of Marilyn Monroe as Bara (discussed in Chapter Two) are both points for further investigation, but I’m more interested in how the images might complicate the already fraught relationship between Bara and race.

The glamorous images of Newton, who is of African descent, raise compelling questions as to what new aspects of critical race theory may be explored by a black actress posing not only as Cleopatra, but also as Bara. Francesca T. Royster, examining the popular image of Cleopatra in terms of cultural iconicity, regards her as a figure of racial indeterminacy that “signifies reinvention”—either through ideological manipulation or personal inspiration. Maintaining that “the labeling of Cleopatra either as a black whore or a liminal white race traitor hounds her cultural history,” Royster points to Bara as a prime example of how this racial and moral ambiguity was represented in the early twentieth century (19). As noted, the dividing line between race and ethnicity is not always clear, as was the case for Celtic, Jewish, southern or eastern European immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century. The strategy of identifying Bara as a representation of marginalized racial/ethnic groups by her original audiences, as explored in Chapter One, has interesting parallels to politicized acts of African American agency connected with the black pride movements of the 1970s, in which various historical figures such as Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, the Virgin Mary, or Jesus Christ were “reclaimed” as black. The effects on the reception and remembrance of Bara brought about by the photos of Newton, which reintroduce or reinforce the perception of both Cleopatra and Bara as racially liminal or non-white, could activate a twenty-first century variant; it is a question worthy of further study.

Bara’s name and image were invoked even more recently in “Vamps, Crooks, and Killers,” a photo feature published by the *New York Times Magazine* in December 2011, with several stars of the past years’ critically hailed films costumed and photographed as famous screen villains. Among them, Glenn Close, in a diaphanous white gown and jeweled headband, imitates Bara, gazing hypnotically at the camera with heavily lined eyes through a gauzy veil

(Figure C.4). In the accompanying text, Close speaks of her fascination with the vamp, and notes, “They say that (Theda Bara) was the first goth.” The online edition of the *Times* has an additional video feature, titled “Touch of Evil,” which includes a fifty-second clip of Close in costume, strongly backlit, turning slowly on a dais as she raises the veil to her face and the saccharine backing music turns sinister.

Looking at the photograph and video of Close, I didn’t see much resemblance to Bara in the costuming and hairstyle, and browsed through the images I’ve collected of Bara over the



**Figure C.4:** The *New York Times* photo of Close as “Theda Bara”

course of writing this dissertation to see if I could find any that seemed to be a likely source. After finding another component of the *Times*’ feature online, a virtual bulletin board of images on which the various stars’ recreations were based, I understood my confusion—and found something that made this case particularly interesting. The large photo captioned on the site as Bara is actually one of “diva” Pina Menichelli, vampish star of early Italian cinema,<sup>2</sup> and the costume and hairstyle of Close’s “Theda Bara” are clearly based on those of Menichelli (Figure C.5). The caption has subsequently been changed to correctly identify the woman in the

photo as Menichelli and not Bara, indicating someone, site viewer or *Times* employee, caught the mistake.

The act of misidentification in this case, however, points out how the participatory nature of cultural memory, made more evident through online practices, elicits counter, and perhaps

corrective, input. It also raises questions about whether mistakes may in some cases actually have positive results, unintentionally enriching what we know and how we know through contrast. With the *Times*'s error and correction, two film stars who linger in semi-forgotten-ness are recalled, and in the negotiation between accurate and erroneous information, links and associations that can enhance the memorability of both women are forged and solidified. In this case Bara, the better remembered star in the United States, served as a kind of mnemonic “life preserver” for Menichelli, just as other stars discussed throughout this dissertation (Pola

Negri, Nita Naldi, Mae West, Marilyn Monroe, Cher, Siouxsie Sioux, etc.) have for Bara. This case could provide a forum for theorizing other ways in which mistakes and erroneous information could be “redeemed” in an epistemologically or mnemonically useful manner.

The indeterminacy between correct and incorrect, dominant and subordinate, conventional and alternative, memory and history that has been a prominent factor in my study of Bara's reception recalls Steedman's admonition that history not be conceived of as *stuff*—facts, dates, information, artifacts—but as a *process* involving “ideation, imagining and



**Figure C.5:** The “Rogues’ Gallery” featured on the *New York Times* website, with a prominent image of Menichelli. The numbered key below the image initially identified the photo of Menichelli as Bara; the misidentification has since been corrected.



remembering” (67). Looked at this way, history and memory, separately or in conjunction, have prompted a number of scholars to analyze what is at stake in this process. For Lipsitz, what’s “At stake...is not just an issue of a comprehensive mainstream history versus eccentric tales told by imaginative outsiders.” Rather, he argues, our “entire understanding” of popular culture’s impact on society “may hinge on what kinds of histories we valorize” (*Footsteps* 104). Tony Bennett articulates the matter succinctly when he states, “more than history is at stake in how the past is represented” (162).

My own intervention into this debate, and what is at stake when “everyday people” contribute to the entwined processes of memory construction and history making, has focused on repurposing Bara in ways that correspond to changing contexts. I see this as an example of media consumers engaging in practices that also repurpose the relation between the past, present, and future, in which engaging with media from decades, or even generations, ago is not an exercise in nostalgia—even though affect may be involved—or social conservatism—for Bara exemplifies the broad range of ideological applications of old media. Rather, for some, looking to the past may simply be a means of compensating for a lack of media texts that “speak to them” in the present, with media and stars of the past inevitably put into dialogue with media and stars of the present, in a discursive relationship that expands the meaning of both. For others, looking to the past may derive from an interest in history, and as my ethnographic research demonstrates, a taste for the old is frequently accompanied by a desire to understand how the past impacts our own moment in time.

The ideas and issues that Bara has helped me explore, such as repurposing of star image, revisionist memory, reception as a historical record, and individuals’ capacity to influence cultural memory, exceed far beyond the confines of a single case study, with bearing on many

other areas of scholarship. In fact, the kinds of media consumer activity and intervention that I've been theorizing—and implicitly advocating—*require* application to other cases in order to have meaning and impact on media history, social issues, and cultural memory. The *Parks and Recreation* episode I've referenced in this conclusion offers a fictional account of what some such practices might look like. More than this, the very fact that a sitcom has brought up questions about ways individuals might influence preservation protocols, remembrance, representation, and the writing of history at the grassroots level puts such matters into popular discourse. Thinking about the impact I hope my scholarship will have, I certainly would like this study to spark renewed interest in Theda Bara and enhance her memorability. More importantly, I hope my study contributes to the conversation, both inside and outside of academia, on how people of all types can have a greater say in ensuring that the things they care about, and that they themselves, will be remembered, and with increased agency as to *how* they will be remembered.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although the novel is published by an obscure press called 1921 PVG Publishing (which uses Bara as a logo on its website), it is available on major online retailers like Barnes and Noble and Amazon, where it's received enthusiastic reviews.

<sup>2</sup> As Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy point out, “the Italian phenomenon of ‘divismo’ and its role in the development of the star system has been obscured by the intense focus on the Hollywood cinema, but it has much to teach us about the constituent material and cultural elements of stardom” (3). As such, the influence of Italian divas of early cinema on American actresses, and vice versa, is an area requiring further study—as are the cultural differences in depictions of “bad women.”

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## **Interviews**

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Basilnelson. E-mail interview. 20 March 2009.

Carpathia, Bathory. E-mail interview. 3 August 2009.

Claudon, C. David. E-mail interview. 5 April 2009.

Denson, Jonathan. E-mail interview. 22 April 2009.

Dye, Phillip. E-mail interview. 15 July 2009.

Flappergirl. E-mail interview. 18 March 2009.

Getz, Charmaine Ortega. E-mail interview. 7 April 2009.

Golden, Eve. E-mail interview. 12 May 2009.

Harriet. E-mail interview. 18 March 2009.

Marr, Lisa. E-mail interview. 13 July 2009.

Neely, Hugh Munro. E-mail interview. 12 November 2009.

Pickford, Hala. E-mail interview. 15 September 2009.

Rachel. E-mail interview. 17 March 2009.

Regina. E-mail interview. 21 March 2009.

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*Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*. Dir. Aviva Kempner. Cielsa Foundation. New Video Group DVD. 2009.

**Mark Andrew Hain**  
**Curriculum vitae**

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**EDUCATION**

- 2015   PhD**   Indiana University, Department of Communication and Culture  
Combined degree in Film and Media Studies and American Studies  
Dissertation title: *Revamped: Theda Bara, Cultural Memory, and the Repurposing of Star Image*  
Dissertation director: Barbara Klinger  
Dissertation defended: February 2013
- 1996   MFA**   Pennsylvania State University, School of Visual Arts  
Studio Emphasis: Printmaking
- 1992   BA**   University of Nebraska, Lincoln  
Graduated Superior Scholar; Major: English  
Minors: Studio Art, Psychology

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Book**

- 2015            *Revamped: Theda Bara, Cultural Memory, and the Repurposing of Star Image*.  
Under review with University of Iowa Press.

**Peer-reviewed Journal Articles and Book Chapters**

- 2105            “‘We Are Here for You’: The It Gets Better Project, Queering Rural Space, and Cultivating Queer Media Literacy.” *Queering the Countryside*. Ed. Mary Gray, Colin Johnson, and Brian Gilley, forthcoming from New York University Press.
- 2013            “Feasting Our Eyes on the Accursed Ugliness: *Famous Monsters*, Lon Chaney Fandom, and Undoing Male Masochism.” *The Journal of Fan Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 5 – 25.
- 2010            “Where the Lilies Bloom.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27, no. 5 (October 2010): 415 – 417.
- 2008            “Black Hair, Black Eyes, Black Soul: Theda Bara and Race Suicide Panic.” *Early Cinema and the “National”*. Ed. Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey Publishing Ltd., 2008): 295 – 306.

- 2007            "Explicit Ambiguity: Hitchcockian Criticism, Sexuality, and the Films of François Ozon." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 3 (May 2007). 277 – 288.

### **Manuscripts in Submission**

- 2015            "Love for Larry: Reclaiming Lorenz Hart from the Tragic Gay Biography." Under review with guest editors for *Celebrity Studies*, special issue on queering celebrity biographies, October 2014.

### **Edited Volumes**

- 2005            "Coming into Focus: Two Hundred Years of Building a Collection." *The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: Two Hundred Years of Excellence, 1805-2005* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2005): 29 – 41. Additionally wrote forty-eight object entries for catalogue section

### **Online Publications**

- 2014            "Fish People in the Family Tree: Race, Sexuality, and Procreation in H.P. Lovecraft Film Adaptations." *Offscreen* 18, vol. 6-7, double issue on "Issues of Gender in the Horror Genre," July 2014.
- 2013            "Let Us Now Praise Famous Monsters: A Conversation" (interview participant). *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*. February 11 and 13, 2013.

### **Reviews**

- 2015            *The New Black* (film review). *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND ACTIVITY**

- 2015            Accepted proposal, "'Why Is Thomas such a Dick?': The BBC's Anachronistic Period Dramas and the Gays You Love to Hate," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Montreal, March 2015  
• Panel chair
- 2014            "Rewriting Failure: Theda Bara's Comeback and the Authorship of Memory," Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Seattle, March 23, 2014

- 2013 “Visualizing the Great American Songbook: Queer Archiving, Class, and Memory,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, March 7, 2013
- 2012 “‘Community History *Is* Film History’”: Remembering through Repurposing in Echo Park Film Center’s Youth Filmmaking Project *Edendale Follies*,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Boston, March 21, 2012
- 2011 “‘Don’t Worry Mom, Dad Can Handle Anything!’: Constructions of Infallible Patriarchy in the *Wilderness Family* Series,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, New Orleans, March 11, 2011  
• Organizer and chair of panel “Playing the Part: Gender, Sexuality, and Children’s Media”
- 2010 “Heretics in the Church of the Poison Mind: 1980s ‘Gender Bender’ Pop Stars and the Negotiation of Self” (paper selected for symposium writing workshop), Queering the Countryside: New Directions in Rural Queer Studies, Indiana University, November 7, 2010
- “Resurrecting the Vamp: Cinema’s Loss and New Media’s Finding of Theda Bara,” On, Archives! A Conference on Media, Theater and History, University of Wisconsin, Madison, July 7, 2010
- “How to Be a Lost Film Fan: *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, the Archiving of *London After Midnight* and the Construction of Subcultural Fan Identities,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Los Angeles, March 19, 2010
- 2008 “Telling It like It Is/Isn’t: On Truth, Biography, Folklore, and the Socio-Political Possibilities in the Star Images of Josephine Baker and Bessie Smith,” The 29th Annual Conference of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Albuquerque, February 14, 2008
- “‘Just Be Yourself’: Queering the Platitude in Disney Animated Features,” Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Philadelphia, March 6, 2008  
• Panel chair
- 2007 “You Don’t Know Jack: The Closet, Silence, and Knowledge in *Brokeback Mountain*,” The 93<sup>rd</sup> National Communication Association Conference, Chicago, November 15, 2007
- “Please Do Not Touch: The Homosocial Masquerade in 1950s Stag Films” Film Indiana Conference, Indiana University, September 15, 2007



- 2006      “‘Are You a Weak Man?’: Constructions of Hegemonic Masculinity in Advertisements for Physical Culture Products, 1900-1925,” The 92<sup>nd</sup> National Communication Association Annual Convention, San Antonio, November 17, 2006
- “Black Hair, Black Eyes, Black Soul: Theda Bara and Race Suicide Panic,” Ninth International Domitor Conference, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, June 2006
- 2005      “Contemplating the Monstrous: Queer Strategies of Viewership in the Horror Films of Barbara Steele,” The 91<sup>st</sup> National Communication Association Annual Convention, Boston, November 19, 2005
- “Explicit Ambiguity: Understanding the Films of François Ozon through the Lens of Hitchcock,” The 26th Annual Conference of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Albuquerque, February 11, 2005
- Panel chair

## **CAMPUS PRESENTATIONS**

- 2014      “Gender and Sexuality in Film Adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft’s Fiction,” and roundtable discussion participant, Diabolique International Film Festival, Bloomington IN, September 19, 2014
- 2011      Invited presenter, teaching portfolio workshop, Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Indiana University, September 16, 2011
- 2009      “Theda Bara and the Repurposing of Star Image,” Communication and Culture departmental colloquium presentation, Indiana University, April 17, 2009
- 2007      Invited participant in “Focus on Film” panel, as part of Indiana University Libraries’ series “Reel Images: Film in Teaching and Research,” Indiana University, October 9, 2007

## **ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

### **Indiana University, Bloomington**

**Assistant Editor, *Black Camera: An International Film Journal***  
 May 2014 – present  
 Black Film Center/Archive

**Associate Instructor**, August 2004 – May 2014  
Department of Communication and Culture

**Research Assistant**, August 2012 – July 2013 (for Barbara Klinger)  
August 2005 – December 2005 (for Greg Waller)  
Department of Communication and Culture

**Associate Instructor**, August 2011 – June 2012; August 2008 – May 2009  
Department of American Studies

### **Pennsylvania State University, University Park**

**Adjunct Instructor**, June 1996 – July 1999, School of Visual Arts

**Instructor**, August 1996 – May 1997  
Division of Continuing and Distance Education

**Graduate Instructor**, August 1994 – May 1996, School of Visual Arts

**Teaching Assistant**, January – May 1994, School of Visual Arts

### **COURSES TAUGHT** (selected)

#### **Indiana University, Department of Communication and Culture**

Public Speaking (Fall 2004, Spring 2005, Fall 2005, Spring 2006, Summer 2008, Spring 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2013, Spring 2014)

Using Popular Culture: Vampires, Ghosts, and the Gothic in Popular Culture  
(Six-week summer course, 2013) (Self-designed course)

Topics in Performance and Culture: Experimental Film, Theater, and Performance Art  
(Fall 2010) (Partially self-designed course)

Media Genres: Television Genres (Fall 2009) (Self-designed course)

Current Topics in Communication and Culture: Media Heritage: History, Culture, and Memory  
(Six-week summer course, 2009) (Self-designed course)

Production as Criticism (Spring 2008) (Instructor for lab section)

Hollywood I (Fall 2007) (Grader)

Introduction to Media, (Fall 2006, Spring 2007)

## **Indiana University, Department of American Studies**

What Is America? (Spring 2012) (Instructor for three discussion sections)

U.S. Arts and Media: American Popular Music and American Identity (Fall 2011, six-week summer course, 2012) (Self-designed course)

Comparative American Identities: Ethnic Food and Multicultural Identity (Fall 2008, Spring 2009) (Self-designed course)

## **ADDITIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

### **University of Pennsylvania**

**Instructor**, March – April 2001, College of General Studies, “Pathways in American Art: Exploring the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts”  
(Designed and co-taught seven-session course)

**Instructor**, October – November, 2000, College of General Studies, “The Golden Age of American Cinema: Classic Films from 1900-1950”  
(Designed and taught six-session course)

### **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**

**Coordinator of Docent Education and Instructor**,  
December 1999 – August 2004, Philadelphia

### **Regional School of Excellence**

**Instructor**, July 1994, Lewistown, PA

## **AWARDS**

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 2013 | Department of Communication and Culture Travel Grant Award,<br>Spring 2013              |
| 2012 | Indiana University College of Arts and Sciences Travel Grant Award,<br>Spring 2012      |
| 2011 | Department of Communication and Culture 2011 Teaching Award for<br>Independent Teaching |
| 2006 | Department of Communication and Culture Travel Grant Award,<br>Spring 2006              |

## **SERVICE**

Proofreader for the Society of Cinema and Media Studies' annual conference program, March 2013

Volunteer committee member of Indiana University's Underground film series, Indiana University, August 2004 – 2013

Graduate Student Representative to the Department of Communication and Culture Undergraduate Committee, 2008 – 2009

Student Liaison to Colloquium and Lecture Series Committee, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University, 2005 – 2006

Volunteer Steering Committee Member for PRIDE, Bloomington, Indiana's GLBT Film Festival, 2004 – 2006

## **MUSEUM PRESENTATIONS (selected)**

"New Art for a New Century: The Eight and the Beginnings of Modernism in America," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, January 21, 2004

"Matching the Pace of Modern Life: The Advent of Modern Art in America," The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, June 19, 2003

"Frozen Glamour: The Film Still and Movie 'Archaeology,'" Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, April 9, 2003

Presentation on the exhibition "On the Edge of Your Seat: American Modernism, Vaudeville, and the Early Cinema," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, April 8, 2003

"Salty and Sanctified Mama: The Music and Influence of Ethel Waters," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, June 13, 2001

"Gems of Sentiment: The Form and Function of the Portrait Miniature," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, February 14, 2001

"Charles Willson Peale and the Rise of the Museum in America," Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, PA, March 15, 2001

"Monkeys, Mastodons, and Birds of Paradise: Charles Willson Peale's Animal Images," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, June 28, 2000